

From Myth to Memory:
Visual Representations as Medial Agents in
the Formation of National Identity

A Visual Discourse Analysis of the Gallic Founding Myth
in Nineteenth-Century France

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*“A united Gaul forming a single nation
animated by the same spirit can defy the universe”*

Caesar, De Bello Gallico, VII. 29

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of visual media in conveying the Gallic founding myth and constructing national identity in nineteenth-century France. Positioned at the interdisciplinary intersection of nationalism studies and memory research, it investigates how visual representations embed the Gallic founding narrative – despite its association with military defeat – into France’s collective memory. Drawing on a modernist understanding of national identity as a social construct and employing visual discourse analysis, the thesis explores how images not only reflect their sociopolitical contexts but also actively shape identity-forming narratives and collective memory. The emergence of the examined representations coincides with the rise of the French nation-state – a period of profound political and social transformation – during which the Gallic founding myth was deliberately mobilized as a tool of identity construction. In this sense, the images both reflect and reinforce the contemporary discourse. At the same time, these visual representations actively participate in that discourse. Through strategies of reinterpretation – especially through the visual reinterpretation of military defeat – they deploy techniques such as selection, simplification, and dramatization to craft a coherent and emotionally resonant narrative. This narrative meets the conditions required to function as a plausible origin myth and to be integrated into collective memory. By conceptualizing visual representations as integral to the discursive production of meaning, the thesis offers a nuanced perspective on their role in national identity formation. As both material and symbolic *lieux de mémoire*, these images contribute significantly to establishing a shared origin narrative and to shaping the development of French national identity in the nineteenth century.

Key words: Gallic founding myth, Imagined Community, Collective memory, Visual media, Visual discourse analysis, Modernism (nationalism studies), *lieux de mémoire*, Nineteenth-century France

1 Introduction

How does a lost battle transform into a founding narrative capable of shaping the identity of an entire nation? And what role do visual representations play – not merely in recalling a collective past, but in actively producing it in the first place?

These questions address a central issue in nationalism studies and collective memory research by highlighting how origin narratives – even if grounded in symbolic losses – are constructed and perpetuated through various media across generations. When Ernest Lavisse proclaimed in 1911 in one of the most popular French history books of the time: “Our country was once called Gaul, and its inhabitants were called Gauls”¹ (Lavisse in Bastié 2016, translated by the author), he was invoking a founding narrative that had become deeply rooted in France’s collective sense of identity. At the heart of this narrative lies the Battle of Alesia (52 BCE), in which the brave Gauls, united under the selfless leadership of Vercingétorix, resisted the Roman Empire and fought for their freedom – only to be ultimately defeated. And yet, it was precisely this defeat that came to be stylized as France’s founding myth. This myth, rooted not in military triumph but in moral integrity, sacrifice and collective unity, emerged as a central element of French identity in the late nineteenth century, during the Third Republic. The prominence of the Gallic founding myth extended beyond school curricula and was vividly articulated through a broad spectrum of visual media, including paintings, sculptures, and illustrations. Far from offering a mere pictorial account of the past, these works actively participate in the construction and articulation of the narratives through which national identity is shaped. They render the myth visible and tangible, and – due to their wide public reception and strong emotional resonance – contribute significantly to anchoring it within the collective memory.

Against this backdrop, this thesis investigates how nineteenth-century visual representations – particularly paintings – of the Gallic founding myth function, on the one hand, as reflections of contemporary discourse surrounding a shared, identity-forming national origin, and, on the other hand, as communicative media that actively disseminate

¹ “Autrefois, notre pays s’appelait la Gaule et ses habitants, les Gaulois.”

and establish this founding narrative – thus playing an active role in the construction of French national identity.

While the Gallic founding myth has been the subject of substantial research within historiography, literary studies, and political science, existing scholarship has largely focused on textual sources, political discourse, and literary reception. Although visual representations have garnered some attention within art history and monument studies, there remains a gap in focused research on the specific role of visual representations of the Gallic founding myth in the discursive construction of nineteenth-century national identity – particularly concerning their modes of medial transmission.

In order to address the research question, the first chapter of this thesis situates visual founding myths within modernist theories of national identity. Drawing on Anderson's theory of *imagined communities* and the concept of *collective memory* developed by Assmann, Assmann and Halbwachs, the Gallic founding myth is conceptualized as an identity-forming founding narrative within the process of nation-building. Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* provides the basis for examining the role of visual representations as both material and immaterial crystallisation points of collective memory.

The second chapter is devoted to the qualitative methodological approach of visual discourse analysis, which builds upon the modernist theoretical framework by enabling an understanding of visual representations as constructs and agents of dynamic social processes that are closely intertwined with discursive power structures.

The concluding chapter undertakes an analysis of selected nineteenth-century paintings of the capitulation scene. Beginning with an examination of their creation within the context of historical circumstances, the chapter investigates how these visual representations, through their media-specific means and strategies, actively contribute to the construction of national identity.

In doing so, this thesis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between visual media, commemorative practices, and conceptions of national identity in nineteenth-century France. It thereby aims to demonstrate how these images not only constitute expressions of a shared past, but also act as agents within the process of national identity formation.

2 Research Contextualisation

In examining how visual representations of the Gallic founding myth contribute to the construction of national identity in France, the focus of this thesis is situated at the intersection of national identity formation, the history of the French nation, founding myths, and visual representations as a medium. This necessitates engagement with a broad body of literature within an interdisciplinary field that combines cultural, social, and historical perspectives. Given that the vast majority of the reviewed works fall within thematically overlapping areas, the following literature review is structured according to these points of intersection, with the exception of the section on theories of nation-building.

In the discourse surrounding the emergence of nations and nationalism, two fundamental schools of thought can be differentiated.² Proponents of primordialism – such as Shils (1957) – regard nations as inherent components of the natural order, viewing national identity as an intrinsic, fundamental and thus predetermined attribute. In contrast, the modernist approach does not conceive of the nation as a “primary nor as an unchanging social entity” (Hobsbawm 1992, 9). Rather, it is understood as a dynamic product of relatively recent historical developments, particularly in relation to the rise of territorial states in the nineteenth century (Hobsbawm 1992, 9–10). By conceptualizing nations and nationalism as products of modernity shaped by industrialization, Hobsbawm finds common ground with Gellner, who identifies a close connection with the emergence of new technologies, access to education, and a universal high culture and communication in their formation (Gellner 1983, 33–38). National identity, within modernist a modernist perspective, thus emerges as a social construct that – depending on specific socio-political and technological conditions – is shaped by institutional and social forces and reinforced through the ideological mechanisms of both the state and civil society.

² Further theoretical approaches to nation-building can be identified beyond these two schools. These range from modernism to primordialism, perennialism, and ethno-symbolism, each encompassing a wide array of internal distinctions and theoretical strands. Within the scope of the present thesis, however, modernist theories are of particular relevance, as they offer an appropriate conceptual foundation for addressing the research question (cf. chap. **Error! Reference source not found.**).

This modernist perspective serves as the overarching theoretical framework for the present thesis, as it facilitates an understanding of how founding myths contribute to the construction of national identity. Within this framework, national identity is conceived as a construct emerging from a dynamic process shaped by memory practices, narrative patterns, and power relations. It builds upon the convergence of several theoretical positions rooted in modernist thought. The conceptualization of national identity draws upon Anderson's notion of the imagined community, emphasizing that such communities are bound and distinguished by a shared collective memory. While Assmann (2011) and Assmann (2020) and Halbwachs (1992) provide foundational approaches to collective memory that enable the recognition of the founding myth as a shared past, Bell (2003) offers complementary insights into the distinctive nature of myths as mechanisms for establishing both cognitive and emotional bonds within communities. Nora's work is particularly relevant to this thesis due to his explicit focus on visual representations as points of reference within the framework of collective memory. Although his extensive publications on *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (2005) concentrate specifically on sites of memory in France, a detailed examination of the Gallic founding myth remains absent from his analyses.³ Building on these theories, the theoretical framework provides a necessary foundation for exploring the research question, since the analysis of how visual representations of the Gallic founding myth shape national identity is inherently embedded in the process of its construction.

2.1 Literature Review

A substantial body of literature has explored the emergence of French national identity and the contribution of the Gallic founding myth to its construction. Situated within a modernist framework, the founding myth is thereby approached as a deliberately constructed narrative. Safran (1991) and Tilly (1995) examine the relationship between socio-political conditions and the emergence of the French nation-state in their respective works. While they contribute significantly to an understanding of the dynamic development of national identity, particularly in relation to the concept of citizenship, a

³ Although Vercingétorix and Caesar are mentioned in this work, Nora refrains from examining the Gallic founding myth in detail (Nora 2005, 407).

more detailed examination of the role of the founding myth and thus the emotional dimension in the construction of national identity remains unaddressed. This gap has been examined in the works of Weber (1991), Geary (2003), Gross (2005), and Michael (1994), who, through various approaches, not only investigate the emergence of the Gallic founding myth in its integrative and identity-constituting function, but also its evolution over time. Providing an insight into the pre-revolutionary period, Geary (2003) suggests that, while the founding myth served as an instrument of political legitimacy and power in France, it did not yet function as an integrative element in the formation of national identity during that time.

In contrast, Weber (1991) explores the post-revolutionary function of the Gallic founding myth, emphasizing its transformation into a socially integrative tool. His analysis provides a crucial foundation for examining the myth as a collective identity-shaping phenomenon within the temporal scope of this thesis, while also establishing a connection to the theoretical framework through its link to collective memory. In line with Weber (1992), both Dietler (1994) and Geary (2003) identify the dissemination and circulation of the Gallic myth as key factors in its role in identity formation. By foregrounding the importance of contextualizing the myth within prevailing technological and institutional conditions, these works can be situated within the modernist paradigm, thereby aligning with the applied theoretical perspective. Although Dietler's (1994) approach is primarily historiographical and archaeological, his analysis provides a crucial foundation for the present thesis by offering a comprehensive account of both the identity-forming and ideological functions of the Gallic founding myth, as well as its dissemination throughout society. The contribution of institutionalization to the establishment of a collective, meaningful founding narrative is evident in McCain's (2022) analysis of the *Académie Celtique* – a finding similarly reflected in Neves's (2013) examination of institutional processes in the educational sector.

By tracing the transformation of the myth into a socially integrative narrative and its anchoring in collective memory, these works establish a direct connection to the theoretical framework—particularly at the intersection of myth and national identity formation. However, while the modernist literature offers valuable insights into the relationship between the Gallic founding myth and national identity, it tends to overlook

the intangible and symbolic processes through which the myth actively contributes to the construction of identity. Further, while artistic representations of the founding myth – both visual and textual – have been addressed in existing scholarship (Dietler 1991; Weber 1993; Pucci 2006), visual depictions are typically treated only peripherally and in largely descriptive terms. A systematic investigation into their specific contribution to the construction of national identity – particularly in relation to their modes of media dissemination – remains largely unexplored. Nonetheless, these works offer a valuable foundation, especially for the first part of the analysis, which situates the relevant visual material within the historical and socio-political context of nineteenth-century France.

Although the Gallic founding myth has been widely examined within the context of (pre-) French history, existing scholarship tends to prioritize factual reconstruction over theoretical engagement, thereby diverging from a modernist perspective. The works of Fields (2014), Sadler and Serdiville (2016), and Gelzer (1968), for instance, focus primarily on reconstructing the historical events of the Battle of Alesia, widely regarded as the myth's central episode, allowing for a (partial) contextualisation of the narrative. Nevertheless, they leave a critical gap in understanding how mythologized history informs national identity discourses. Many works at the intersection of the founding myth and (pre-) French history reference or engage with Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* (51 – 50 BCE⁴), which is widely regarded as a central source, offering an account of the events surrounding the Battle of Alesia in 52 BCE from the perspective of one of its principal participants. However, this dependence raises significant issues and invites further research, given the scarcity of other contemporary sources and the tendency of later accounts to rely heavily on Caesar's narrative. Scholars such as Osgood (2009) and Inker (2008) critically engage with the resulting question of the objectivity of *De Bello Gallico*, particularly in relation to Caesar's political self-fashioning and his efforts to consolidate power during the Gallic Wars. Nevertheless, the scholarship at this intersection provides the foundation for classifying the Gallic founding myth as a retrospectively constructed narrative (cf. chap. 3.4). Concerns regarding the objectivity

⁴ Since the original text is written in Latin and a detailed historical analysis is not the focus of this thesis, the following secondary source is used: Gerhard Nöring, *De bello Gallico: The Gallic War – Caesar – Original Version with Additional Commentary*, 19783, Reclam Verlag, 2014.

of historically verifiable facts do not fall within the scope of this thesis. Rather, the present approach serves to validate key premises of modernist theories of nation-building, demonstrating that, in the context of constructing national identity, history is shaped by a selective and evolving process of collective memory.⁵

Overall, a review of the academic literature demonstrates a significant disparity: while the broader thematic foundations have been extensively studied, the particular intersection explored in this thesis – especially with regards to visual representations – has received comparatively little attention. In addition to studies focusing on Gallic art during the Gallic period – such as Pobé’s *The Art of Roman Gaul* (1961) and Cassibry’s (2016) work on coinage – further scholarship has examined representations of nation-building figures in France, notably Warner’s *Joan of Arc: Image of Female Heroism* (1999). While Warner references visual representations as expressions of nationhood, her analysis does not specifically address their role within the process of national identity construction. Similarly, Mutta’s (2016) work of the *Asterix* comics series, which has been in continuous publication since 1959, underscores the enduring resonance of the founding narrative and considers the character of Asterix—modeled after Vercingétorix – as a potent symbol of identity formation, yet falls outside the temporal scope of investigation. Mitra and König’s (2013) Indo-French comparative study of national allegories provides a useful entry point for investigating the strategic use of visual imagery in constructing national identity. Nevertheless, their analysis diverges from the focus of this thesis, as it neither specifically examines the French founding myth nor considers the discursive frameworks that inform the present thesis (cf. chap. 4).

In summary, the existing body of scholarship offers a solid foundation for the development of the theoretical and definitional framework of this thesis. It provides essential historical context regarding France and the Gallic founding myth, alongside key insights into its role in the construction of national identity. Furthermore, scholarship on the socio-political context of nineteenth-century France and the function of myth as both an instrument of identity formation and political power offer valuable perspectives for

⁵ Proponents of historical realism even suggest that historical representations can never be truly objective due to the subjective selection and interpretation of facts by historians themselves (Lingelbach 2006, 224).

addressing the research question. Additionally, investigations into visual representations from a visual-media standpoint present valuable methodological considerations. Nevertheless, the literature review reveals a notable gap at the intersection of French national identity, the Gallic founding myth, and the role of visual representations – an intersection that constitutes the central focus of the present thesis.

2.2 Research Questions and Relevancy of Research

While research at the thematic intersection between the Gallic founding myth and national identity often focuses on a descriptive or causal level of analysis, primarily addressing questions about characteristics (*What?*) and causes (*Why?*), the focus of the present thesis lies on the processual dimension (*How?*).

Building on an interdisciplinary approach within the humanities, this thesis focuses on analyzing the strategic, visual, and dynamic processes through which visual representations of the Gallic founding myth contribute to the construction of collective identity in nineteenth-century France. This investigation is guided by the following research question:

How do visual representations of the Gallic founding myth contribute to the construction of French national identity in the nineteenth-century?

Given that this question is approached within a modernist framework, which inherently ties it to socially constructed phenomena, and considering the unique characteristics of visual representations in their media function, the analysis is divided into two complementary sub-questions, whose synthesis serves to answer the overarching research question.

- a) *How do visual representations of the Gallic founding myth emerge in nineteenth-century France as expressions of national identity? (visual representations as products of specific socio-political conditions)*
- b) *How do visual-compositional techniques and strategies within these representations enable the collective, identity-forming assimilation of the founding myth? (visual representations as agents within specific socio-political conditions)*

The integration of these two perspectives allows for the examination of visual representations of the Gallic founding myth not only as indicators of broader social phenomena but also in terms of their impact on the construction of national identity.

Although the construction of national identity has been extensively examined in cultural and social science research (cf. chap. 2.1), the role of visual representations in this process has remained largely unaddressed. Notably, there is a lack of systematic engagement with the processual dimension of visual representations as a medium within the framework of national identity construction. By addressing this research gap, this thesis seeks to contribute an additional perspective to the research of national identity construction through the analysis of visual-media mechanisms.

The investigation of visual-media strategies provides an important complement to text-based approaches by analyzing the operative mechanisms of visual media within the complex and dynamic process of constructing national identity. By analyzing the ways in which visual media anchor national founding narratives in collective identity from a discourse-analytical perspective, this thesis thereby contributes to research in a relatively new scholarly field (Mitra and König 2013, 358).

This thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on cultural studies, the social sciences, and history to examine the role of visual representations as a central medium in the construction of national identity. The historical approach allows the founding myth to be contextualized as a distinctive form of historic founding narratives. Within the cultural studies framework, particular emphasis is placed on the role of shared history in collective identity-forming processes and constructs. Ultimately, the inclusion of a social science approach enables a critical examination of the power dynamics and institutional mechanisms underpinning the discursive formation of historical narratives.

By examining the Gallic founding myth as a ‘case study’, this thesis exemplifies how visual communication techniques and strategies can contribute to the transmission and anchoring of national founding myths in collective memory, thereby actively participating in the formation of national identity. The Gallic founding myth of France thereby presents an especially compelling case for an in-depth analysis of national identity construction: Firstly, the historiographical literature provides a comprehensive account of the emergence and development of the myth, thus providing a suitable starting

point for investigating the research questions. Secondly, the emergence of the examined visual representations is demonstrably linked to the socio-political context of nineteenth-century France, which substantiates the research findings from a discourse-theoretical perspective (cf. chap. 4.1.1). Thirdly, the large number of available representations provides sufficient material for analysis and thus an ideal basis for identifying overarching patterns.

The period of investigation for this research is the nineteenth century, as it was during this time that the socio-political conditions essential to the development of national identity converged (cf. chap.4.2). While the formation of national identity constitutes a continuous and dynamic process that neither began nor ended in this era, the nineteenth century represents a decisive period in which the narrative surrounding Vercingétorix and the Gauls first assumed an integrative, identity-forming function. It thus not only aligns with the modernist understanding of nation formation, but also exhibits a remarkable proliferation of visual representations of the founding myth (cf. chap. 5.1). In light of this, the nineteenth century emerges as an especially suitable period for analyzing visual practices as instruments of national identity formation.

2.3 Narrative Foundations of the Gallic Founding Myth

The central narrative of the Gallic founding myth presents an essential foundation for the contextualization and understanding of the subsequent analysis. In order to investigate how visual representations, contribute to the construction of national identity, it is first necessary to specify which collective ‘history’ is being visually negotiated. The Gallic founding narrative provides the required content reference framework, with its recognizability within the visual motifs facilitating the analysis of its impact on identity formation (cf. chap. 3.5). Thus, the familiarity with the narrative constitutes the prerequisite for the content-based classification of the images, as well as, for examining their contribution to the construction of identity. The focus, however, lies not on an objective historiographical reconstruction, but rather on the discursive-mythological creation of meaning, whose characterization and contextualization are explored in detail in chapter 3.4 on the theory of national myths.

The Gallic founding myth is centered around the idea that the historical origins of the French nation trace back to a united, resilient country called Gaul that, under the

leadership of its chieftain Vercingétorix, resisted the Roman conquest. The narrative is situated in the context of the Gallic Wars, which began in 58 BCE with the Roman invasion and lasted until 51 BCE. During this period, the Roman Empire, led by Julius Caesar, fought against various Gallic tribes in an attempt to conquer Gallic territory (Sadler and Serdiville 2016, chap. 1). In 52 BCE, the Arverni chieftain Vercingétorix emerged as a key figure in the resistance against Roman occupation (MacKillop 2005, 4). Under his leadership, he successfully united various independent – and at times rival – Gallic tribes in an uprising against the Romans. Despite initial significant successes, the Gauls were ultimately defeated by the Roman army in the Battle of Alesia after a prolonged siege and fierce resistance (Neves 2013, 638; Sadler and Serdiville 2016, chap. 1). Vercingétorix's self-sacrificial act constitutes a central element of the myth: in a plea for mercy on behalf of his army and to spare his people from further suffering, he surrendered himself. In doing so, he preserved his pride and honor by laying down his weapons at Caesar's feet and formally submitting to him (Neves 2013, 638). He was subsequently taken prisoner and brought to Rome, where he was executed in 46 BCE (Fields 2013, 82). To this day, this myth serves as a symbolic narrative of independence, resilience, and cultural cohesion in France (Neves 2013, 640).

3 Theoretical Framework

In analyzing how visual representations of the Gallic founding myth contribute to the formation of national identity, this thesis rests on the foundational premise that national identity is a socially constructed and thus a socially constructible 'phenomenon'. Accordingly, national identity is not perceived as a fixed or inherent entity, but rather as the outcome of a dynamic, communicative process that can be mediated, negotiated, and actively shaped. This perspective situates the research within a modernist theoretical framework.

Hence, the investigation of the research question requires a theoretical approach that conceives of national identity as a social construct, conceptualizes founding myths as a constitutive element of national identity, and recognizes visual representations as a medium through which such myths are established as identity-forming narratives. These premises constitute the foundational basis that informs the organization and development

of the theoretical framework: The first section commences with a definitional approach to national identity as a constructed process. Within the modernist perspective, the nation is regarded as an “imagined community” in which collective memory serves as a connective and identity-forming element. Next, the founding myth – as a collectively shared history – is situated within the process of national identity formation, with particular emphasis on its efficacy mechanisms. Finally, the focus turns to visual representations and their specific function as a medium through which national identity can be conveyed and constructed.

As such, the theoretical framework offers a deductive approach to the analysis, proceeding from modernist theories on the emergence of national identity and gradually classifying the visual representations of the Gallic founding myth as instruments of identity formation. However, it should be noted that identity formation cannot be neatly divided into individual phases, but instead constitutes a dynamic, continuous and interactive process.

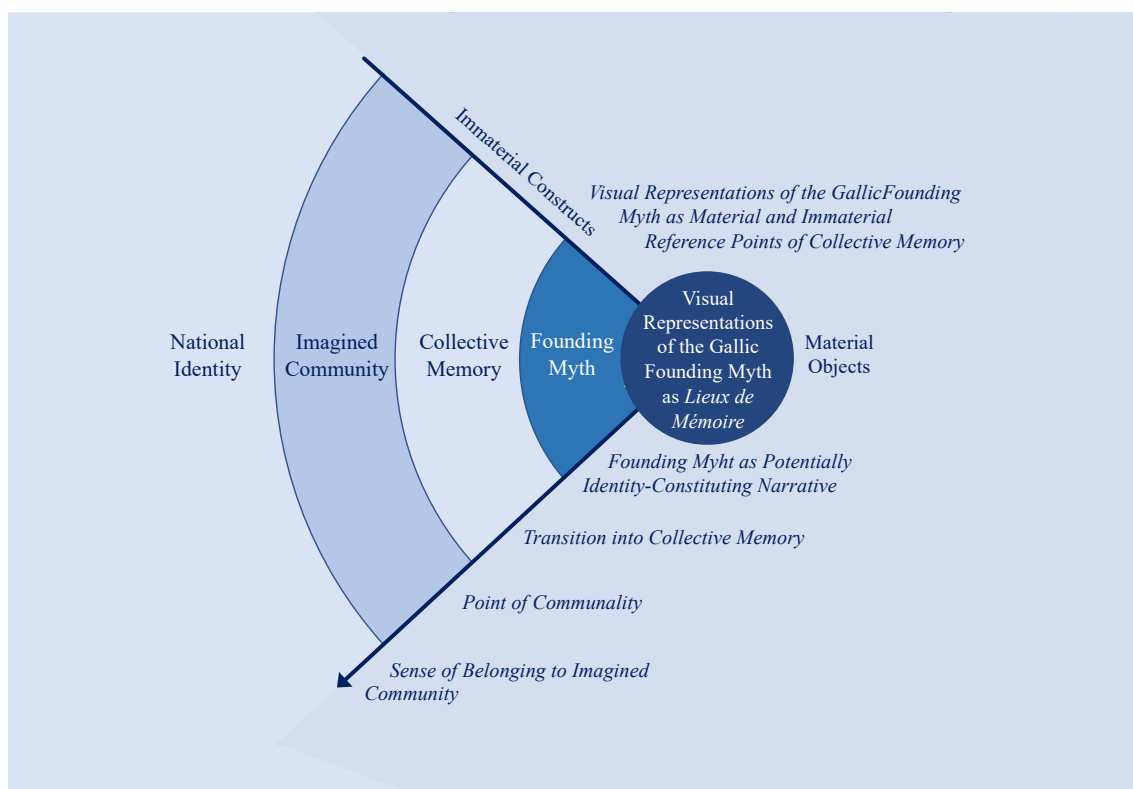


Fig. 1 Theoretical Approach

Source: own illustration

3.1 Towards a Conceptual Definition of National Identity

Within the modernist perspective adopted in this thesis, the nation is conceived as an “inherently limited and sovereign” ‘imagined community’ – comprising individuals who will never encounter one another personally (Anderson 1983, 6). Accordingly, the nation is founded upon a collective sense of belonging (national identity), which derives from a shared perception of what constitutes the community as such (Anderson 1983, 6). National identity is thus neither fixed nor predetermined but is continually subject to a process of “constant re-negotiation” (Bell 2003, 67) which allows for its understanding as a socio-cultural construct (Anderson 1983, 6) that is continuously shaped and reproduced through communicative practices within the community. The shared perception among the members of a nation about the “image of their communion” (Anderson 1983, 6) is reflected in collectively perceived commonalities (points of communality), which serve as essential identity-forming components in the process of nation-building.

A central point of communality within the imagined community is constituted by the ‘collective memory’, understood as “a memory that is somehow to be found in and shared between many, perhaps most, of the members of any given national community” (Bell 2003, 69). By sharing this memory, the members of a nation experience themselves as part of a larger collective (Assmann 2012, 25). Hence, this collective memory functions as a unifying element between the members of the imagined community – and thus serves as a fundamental component of national identity.

From a strictly literal perspective, a “collective” memory does not exist, as groups lack an independent (physical) memory (Assmann 2012, 22). Nevertheless, the implementation of the term can be attributed the significant impact of social contexts on individual memory: an individual’s act of remembering is inextricably linked to prevailing social conditions and value systems since the formation and evaluation of memories always occurs in relation to collective frameworks of meaning (Halbwachs 1992, 43). In this sense, there is a ‘collective memory’ because individual memories are inextricably dependent on preexisting cultural, symbolic, and discursive structures.

Correspondingly, the collective memory emerges as a “social phenomenon” (Halbwachs in Assmann 2012, 21-22). As such, the collective memory does not preserve a static past

but operates in an ongoing process in which memories are continuously negotiated in relation to present needs, interpretive frameworks, and the construction of collective identity (Assmann 2012, 27; Halbwachs 1992, 188). Within this process, the prevailing “social framework” determines which memories are selected and deemed ‘worthy of remembering’, thereby acting as a “filter” (A. Assmann 2020, 79). The relationship between collective memory and national identity thereby unfolds in a circular fashion: “What is remembered strengthens the group’s identity, and the group’s identity solidifies the memories“ (A. Assmann 2020, 79, translated by the author⁶). Thus, collective memory operates in an inherently selective manner, shaped by the prevailing frameworks of reference and value within the community, which highlight certain aspects of the past while marginalizing or excluding others. Hence, memory is never neutral but always embedded within power relations (A. Assmann 2008, 58).

The perception of collective memory as a dynamic process in which social meanings are constantly renegotiated and reconstructed (Bell 2003, 72) is conceptualized as discourse within the methodological approach of this thesis: “discourse is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” (Rose 2016, chap. 8.1).

Following this first section, national identity is understood as a social and cultural construct, with collective memory – as point of communality – serving as both an identity-forming and integrative element. This perspective is based on the premise that collective memory enables the imagined community to define itself as such by creating an intangible bond among its members. This definitional understanding provides the conceptual basis for classifying the founding myth as part of collective memory and thus national identity.

⁶ Original: “[...] erinnert wird, was die Identität der Gruppe stärkt, und die Identität der Gruppe befestigt die Erinnerungen.“

3.2 The Founding Myth as Collectively remembered Past

In establishing a shared “historical” narrative as a “collectively remembered past”, the founding myth constitutes a central component of collective memory. Based on the definitional understanding of national identity it therefore serves as a collectively perceived point of commonality within the imagined community. Subsequently, history does not present a sequence of objective and static historical facts. Instead, it constitutes a collectively remembered past, embedded within social, cultural, and discursive processes, where ‘historical’ events are selected, reconstructed and adapted and ‘filtered’ through the prevailing ‘social framework’ of a given community (Karlsson 2010, 65).

The founding myth represents a particularly powerful form of socially constructed ‘history’, as it provides “a story that simplifies, dramatizes, and selectively narrates the history of a nation’s past and its place in the world, [...] [and] elucidates its contemporary significance through (re)constructing its past” (Bell 2003, 75)⁷.

By encompassing the common past of a nation in a single narrative, it forms a central point of reference for collective memory, whereby history and memory cannot be clearly distinguished from one another. Hence, the founding myth emerges as a collective “site of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*), which is “created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that results in their reciprocal overdetermination” (Nora 1989, 19). By establishing “a maximum of meaning in a minimum of signs” (Nora 1989, 19), *lieux de mémoire* condense collective memory by making it tangible in “material, symbolic and functional” (Nora 1989, 18-19) form. The founding myth thus emerges as a condensed expression of a collectively perceived past. Within the discursive space, its interpretation is subject to a dynamic process through which it is continuously produced, transmitted, reshaped, and debated (Bell 2003, 75), resulting in an “endless recycling of [its]” (Nora 1989, 19).

⁷ Bell (2003) defines the concept of the “nationalist myth.” The Gallic founding myth can be understood as such in accordance with Bell’s definition; therefore, his conceptualization is applied throughout the thesis.

3.3 Identity-Constructing Mechanisms of Founding Myths

The ability of a narrative to function as a *lieu de mémoire* is dependent on its capacity to provide substantive opportunities for collective identification. The transformation of “historical” narratives into a founding myth and thus into a “collectively remembered past” is achieved through specific mechanisms of efficacy. The establishment of emotional resonance and authenticity emerge as essential prerequisites for an identity-forming impact of the founding myth (Bell 2003, 67; Dietler 1994, 585).

Emotional resonance – understood as the capacity to evoke strong feelings and identification on both individual and collective levels – constitutes a central mechanism in the efficacy of founding narratives. Its impact derives from its ability to transcend purely rational ‘historical’ narration, fostering affective bonds that enable collective identification. By creating a “felt sense of belonging,” it renders the abstract concept of the nation emotionally perceptible, enabling the transformation of ‘history’ into a ‘collectively remembered past’:

Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate: our ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past with great men and glory [...] is the social capital upon which the national idea rests. These are the essential conditions of being a people: having common glories in the past and a will to continue them in the present; having made great things together and wishing to make them again (Renan 1882).

The evocation of a “heroic past with great men and glory” (Renan 1882) as a collectively unifying element creates emotional resonance and forms a common point of identification within the collective memory by establishing the “will to continue them [the shared glories]” (Renan 1882) in the present. The establishment of continuity with a shared ‘historical’ past is thereby central to the perceived authenticity of the founding myth. This authenticity is not grounded in historical fact but emerges from a continuum of meaning that “locates the collectivity [imagined community] inside a shared history“ (Bell 2003, 70). It therefore provides a framework for orientation through connecting past, present and future (Renan 1882): the implied continuity with a shared historical origin serves as a unifying element in the present, suggesting that the nation’s enduring existence maintains a connection among its members through common ancestry. From this perspective, national identity does not appear as the result of rational agreements, but

rather as an ostensibly immutable, genealogical, and enduring shared origin: “Having a nation is not an inherent attribute, but it has come to appear as such” (Gellner 1983, 6). This reference to the persistence of a historical past in the present lends the nation “moral and political authenticity” (Bell, 2003, 67).

The transformation of a historical narrative into an identity-forming founding myth thus requires the establishment of a coherent narrative that creates both emotional resonance and authenticity. These prerequisites are created through various narrative and symbolic strategies. The interplay of narrative glorification and a simplified, accessible mode of presentation (Bell 2003, 67), allows for “a convincing narrative reconstruction” (Bell 2003, 68) of the past, in which historical accuracy and complexity are subordinated to a simplified and coherent story (Bell 2013, 75). Thus, glorification, simplification, and selection constitute the prerequisites for the identity-forming mechanisms of efficacy of the myth. These strategies and instruments form the basis for analyzing how visual representations of the Gallic myth function in the construction of collective identity in nineteenth-century France.

3.4 The Gallic Founding Myth as ‘Point of Communality’

Following the modernist theoretical framework, the Gallic founding myth – *as lieu de mémoire* – represents a social “phenomenon”: The focus thereby lies on its ability to create and perpetuate collective identity rather than on its historical accuracy. However, in order to illustrate the extent to which the Gallic founding narrative can be classified as an identity-forming myth, i.e. whether it exhibits the strategies of simplification, selection and dramatization that enable its identity-forming function, a brief historical contextualization is required. This contextualization does not, in any way, purport to provide an objective or exhaustive account of historical facts.⁸ This classification of the narrative as an identity-forming myth serves as a preliminary to examining how visual representations contribute to this process.

⁸ On the one hand, this has already been addressed extensively (cf. chap. 2.1); on the other hand, the present thesis is grounded in a modernist understanding of history (cf. chap. 3). The aim, therefore, is to classify why and in what ways the myth functions as such.

The simplification within the Gallic founding myth is particularly evident in the construction of a coherent and easily comprehensible national origin narrative. By means of a genealogical reduction the French nation is traced back to a united Gaul, explicitly positioning the Gauls⁹ as collective ancestors and stylizing Vercingétorix as the symbolic representative of this imagined unity. However, this representation disregards historical complexity: The early population of what is now considered France was shaped by a multitude of ethnic and cultural groups, which became even more differentiated following the Roman victory.¹⁰ Moreover, significant doubts persist regarding the existence of a coherent Gallic identity in the form of a shared culture or even a political unity, as the Gauls themselves did not constitute a homogeneous group but rather comprised “a fluid network of autonomous societies speaking a set of related languages linked by exchange, and differentially sharing certain cultural elements, but exhibiting considerable variation in political organization and other sociocultural structures and practices” (Dietler 1994, 586).¹¹

The selection of the Battle of Alesia as the central event in the Gallic founding myth constitutes an additional simplification of historical complexity. It focuses on a highly abridged segment of pre-French history – an episode that predates the emergence of the French nation or republic. A broader historical contextualization remains notably absent. In particular, it fails to account for Gaul’s integration into the Roman provincial system following its conquest, which was accompanied by an extensive Romanization (Fields 2013, 83; Neves 2013, 639). Thus, the Roman heritage of France – including its cultural,

⁹ There is no clear or consistent distinction between the terms “Celts” and “Gauls,” as they were applied to different peoples and regions over time. As Dietler (1994) notes, the Greeks referred to these groups as Celts, while the Romans called them Gauls. The term “Celts” first appears in the writings of the Greek geographer Hecataeus of Miletus to describe peoples living in the northern regions bordering the Greek world. Since the precise differentiation of these terms is not central to this thesis, and as the founding myth in question specifically concerns the Gauls, the term “Gauls” will be applied throughout.

¹⁰ This Gallo-Roman culture was later significantly influenced by Germanic tribes following the invasion of the Franks in the 5th century (Wächter 2023, 1583). In addition to the influences, invasions by the Scandinavian Normans, the Hungarians, and the Saracens also left their marks.

¹¹ According to the modernist understanding of national identity formation, which views nations as modern constructs, it would be inaccurate to assume that the Gauls considered themselves “French,” as the concept of a French national identity did not exist at that time.

legal, and infrastructural influences (Dietler 1994, 588) – is largely marginalized within the narrative.¹²

Additionally, the events within this chosen sequence are subject to significant dramatization. Vercingétorix is portrayed as the central hero who, through his surrender on behalf of the entire Gallic people, performs a heroic act of sacrifice. This portrayal highlights themes of resistance, solidarity, and courage in the Gallic fight against Rome (Neves 2013, 639). By contrast, a historiographical assessment suggests a more nuanced picture: Vercingétorix succeeded in uniting the Gallic tribes against the Romans for only a short time, during which the unity remained fragile (Bremm 2023, 58). Resistance ultimately failed, as the Gallic tribes were definitively subjugated following their defeat at Alesia (Fields 2014, 82). In addition, the available sources (cf. chap. 2.1) do not permit a reliable statement regarding the actual execution of Vercingétorix's heroic act.¹³

3.5 Visual Representations of the Founding Myth – Media-Specific Characteristics

The integration of founding myths into the collective identity depends on their transmission through various forms of communication. This mediation is essential for the transmission of memory and thus for the establishment of collective memory as a shared unifying element: “Memories rely [...] on mediation and transmission”, with ‘remembering’ understood as a “process of communication“ (Rüsen and Jaeger, 2006, 78, translated by the author).¹⁴

In the process of constructing collective identity, both textual and visual forms serve as mediums of communication. Visual representations in isolation, however, fall short of conveying the founding myth independently, as their meaning requires a conjunction with

¹² The thematic focus of this thesis is limited to the contrast between Gauls and Romans. An analysis of other population groups – who have likewise been historically or currently marginalized or excluded from the national narrative – does not fall within this specific scope (cf. chap. 7).

¹³ Caesar's portrayal of the Gauls as brutal and barbaric might have served to justify the conflict, Roman actions, and his own authority (Ross 1939, 449). Similarly, depicting Vercingétorix as a strong and noble adversary may have elevated the significance of Caesar's victory (Ross 1939, 449; Sadler and Serdiville 2016, chap. 1).

¹⁴ Original: „Erinnerungen sind [...] darauf angewiesen, dass sie vermittelt und transportiert werden“ wobei das „sich erinnern“ als „kommunikativer Prozess“ einzuordnen ist.

other (textual) works and (pre-)existing cultural knowledge. Without this prior knowledge, visual representations carry the risk of becoming ambiguous or difficult to comprehend. Therefore, visual representations of the founding myth rely on intertextuality,¹⁵ which “refers to the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts.” (Rose 2016, chap. 8.1).¹⁶ Image and language structure the perception and interpretation of reality in a complementary manner (Nancy in Traue and Blanc 2018, 714).

While the linguistic transmission of information¹⁷ – whether oral or written – is essential for the comprehension and contextualization of paintings, statues, or monuments, visual representations render abstract narratives more (emotionally) accessible. By “transforming an idea into an image with which the nation can identify as an imagined community” (Mitra and König, 2013, 357), it facilitates its recollection and supports its lasting embedding in the collective memory.

As a communicative medium, visual representations possess particular properties that render them effective tools for transmitting national narratives. The ‘visual’ is regarded as the most primal and simultaneously the most significant way of perceiving and understanding the world – in the sense of an immediate connection between “seeing and knowing” (Jenks 1995 quoted in Rose 2016, chap. 1.1.1). While their materiality imposes inherent physical limitations on the depiction of actions or motifs, visual representations¹⁸ simultaneously allow for a broader scope of individual interpretation. Visual representations communicate through a symbolic, universal language that is particularly effective due to its immediate sensory impact (Traue and Blanc 2018, 712).

¹⁵ The analysis of visual representations therefore requires a preliminary content-based textual account of the Gallic founding myth as an interpretive foundation. This account is based on a synthesis of several textual sources (cf. chap. 2.3).

¹⁶ In the following, the term intertextuality is understood to encompass both cross-media image-text relations and purely visual image-image references.

¹⁷ Language, can be perceived as a “fundamental symbol of group membership” (Wróbel 2024, 223, translated by the author), and thus be considered a component of a nation’s collective memory culture.

¹⁸ Series of images, comics, or moving images (films) are not considered in the present thesis.

Their particular impact derives from their ability to translate abstract concepts – such as morality, belonging, or willingness to sacrifice – into concrete, sensually and emotionally perceptible forms (Mitra and König 2013, 358), thereby collectively anchoring historical narratives on an emotional level.

By enabling recognition of the founding narrative within an intertextual framework, visual representations significantly contribute to the attribution of authenticity through the visual accessibility and the materialization of abstract narratives. Familiar motifs and visual patterns anchor the depicted event within the collective memory, rendering it seemingly “authentic” and credible, while also facilitating the collective emotional embedding of historical narratives. Visual representations not only reflect societal conceptions of the past but also actively shape the perception of historical events through their specific modes of depiction, thereby constructing ‘reality’ both in terms of what is shown and how it is presented (Kanter 2016). Furthermore, as physical and perceptible embodiments of history, visual representations initiate a sustained public engagement with their content when displayed and encountered, thus actively participating in the formation of collective memory.

Visual representations are characterized by their interpretive openness, their capacity to visualize intangible values, and their potential to actively shape content and meaning. These qualities render them particularly suited to evoke emotional resonance and a sense of authenticity, as well as to foster a feeling of continuity with the past. This suggests that visual representations present a suitable medium for the construction of national identity within the scope of the research question.

3.6 Visual Representations as (Im)material *Lieux de Mémoire*

In order for a founding myth to function effectively as an identity-forming narrative, a conscious reduction of historical complexity proves essential: multi-layered events and dynamics are condensed into a coherent story that renders the collective origin both intuitively comprehensible and emotionally resonant, thus enabling collective identification. Here, visual representations display a distinct dual character: they function as both immaterial and material places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*). This entails that they act on a symbolic-content level – as carriers of narratives and meanings – and on a media-visual level – as tangible, visible images or objects. The need for reduction thus

arises in two respects: on the one hand, visual representations as immaterial *lieux de mémoire* in their symbolic and narrative mediation must meet the requirements of the collective identity-forming effect of the founding myth; on the other hand, visual representations of the founding myth as material *lieux de mémoire* are formally and technically limited in their narrative mediation by their materiality, which necessitates further selection and narrative condensation. The research question is situated within this field of tension between material and immaterial *lieux de mémoire*: How do visual representations – within their own limits and possibilities – establish the Gallic founding myth in the collective memory and thus contribute to the construction of national identity?

4 Methodology

In examining the contribution of visual representations to the discursive construction of national identity – particularly with regard to the mediation of a shared past – this thesis employs a qualitative-interpretive methodological approach. Based on the assumption that visual representations function as both expressions and agents in the process of constructing national identity (cf. chap. 3), this thesis aims to analyze how images as a physical medium contribute to the conveyance of abstract concepts. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on the medial and discursive mechanisms (*How?*) through which visual representations of the Gallic founding myth contribute to the constitution of collective memory, and thus national identity.

This necessitates particular methodological considerations:

- a. Analyzing visual representations as both material manifestations of discourse and as agents of identity formation necessitates their contextualization within the prevailing sociopolitical framework, since this context shapes the discourse itself.
- b. The methodological approach must be capable of capturing and analyzing intangible processes of transformation – specifically, those processes of meaning attribution (with regard to a shared past) through which visual representations, in interplay with discursive contexts, unfold their identity-forming function.
- c. Investigating the discursive construction of collective identity also necessitates moving beyond an isolated examination of individual visual representations (cf.

chap. 3.5). Instead, it calls for a methodological approach that allows for the identification of visual strategies that operate across multiple images.

4.1 Visual Discourse Analysis as Methodological Approach

Building on these requirements, this thesis employs visual discourse analysis as its methodological approach.¹⁹ This approach conceptualizes visual representations as integral elements of socially constructed discourses, through which specific meanings are rendered “natural” or “truthful” (Rose 2016, chap. 8.3.2). Central to this perspective is the analysis of the power relations and social structures that shape and perpetuate these visual regimes of truth (Rose 2016, chap. 8.3.2). Visual discourse analysis stands out for its systematic approach, enabling a targeted investigation of the research question while simultaneously incorporating methodological and theoretical dimensions within an integrative framework. However, it cannot be applied independently of the theoretical assumptions that inform and structure its use. While these align with the modernist theoretical framework of this thesis (cf. chap. **Error! Reference source not found.**), they nonetheless require an initial contextualisation to clearly articulate the interrelation between method and theory.

4.1.1 Theoretical Background of Visual Discourse Analysis

The visual discourse analysis emerged following the visual, iconic, and image-based turns of the 1990s²⁰, during which the fundamental role of images in constituting social realities was extensively recognized within academic discourse (Traue and Blanc 2018, 708). Despite their longstanding presence in the social sciences, images were often ascribed a purely descriptive function or considered solely for their representational value (Traue et al. 2018, 327). This turn marked an acknowledgment of the significance of visual

¹⁹ The methodological approach is primarily guided by Gillian Rose’s framework of “Visual Discourse Analysis I” (Rose 2016, chap. 8).

²⁰ The term “pictorial turn” was first introduced by W. J. T. Mitchell (1994), who describes it as a “post-linguistic, post-semiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality” (16). Mitchell suggest that traditional text-based methods are insufficient for analyzing contemporary visual culture, thus calling for a systematic and specific critique of visibility (Mitchell 1994, 16).

representations in actively shaping social or cultural meanings (Traue et al. 2018, 327; Traue and Blanc 2018, 708).

Similar to textual media, visual representations extend beyond merely depicting social realities and assume an active role in their constitution. Images, akin to linguistic expressions, are not passive reflections of reality but are embedded with interpretations and perspectives that shape and influence how the viewer perceives reality (Miggelbrink and Schlottmann 2021, 232). Accordingly, the focus shifts from a mere understanding of what images represent to a deeper investigation of how meaning is actively constructed through visual representation (Rose 2016, chap. 8.2.3; Traue and Blanc 2018, 710).

Building on Foucault's foundational work in discourse analysis, visual discourse analysis applies and methodologically modifies its theoretical principles for the study of visual representations (Traue et al. 2018, 329).²¹ Thus, both approaches share their central premises, yet differ in their operationalization. Whereas traditional discourse analysis primarily focuses on linguistic phenomena, visual discourse analysis attributes a significant analytical dimension to images (Traue and Blanc 2018, 712). Analogous to the 'sayability' of language/text in classical discourse analysis, 'visibility' within the visual approach holds the capacity to "structure the perception and naming of reality" (Traue and Blanc 2018, 712, translated by the author). Thus, it modifies classical discourse analysis by treating images as forms of "evidence" that convey underlying meanings, ideologies, and social practices. In doing so, it positions visual representations as active agents in constructing and mediating discourses – reinforcing or challenging particular perspectives, ideologies, and social narratives (Traue et al. 2018, 329; Traue and Blanc 2018, 708). The primary emphasis lies in examining "how images construct accounts of the social world" (Rose 2016, chap. 8.2.3). Visual discourse analysis thereby incorporates intertextuality as a key analytic principle, conceptualizing images as elements within a network of signs, whose significance is realized only through their interaction with other visual and textual discourses.

²¹ As can be seen in Rose: "Both [approaches to Visual Discourse Analysis] depend on specifically Foucauldian notions of discourse, but each puts Foucault's arguments to work in rather different ways, with rather different effects" (Rose 2016, chap. 2.2.2).

Moreover – in line with the premisses of classical (text-based) discourse analysis – the investigation centers on the broader social processes and power relations that impact these discourses, analyzing how societal structures, norms, and power relations shape their emergence and circulation beeinflussen (Rose 2016, chap. 8.2.3; Rose 2007, XV). As an independent form of discursive expression, their “[...] analysis allows conclusions to be drawn about the social context of their production” (Miggelbrink and Schlottmann 2021, 224, translated by the author).²²

In this respect, images, akin to texts, construct meaning by selectively presenting certain features of reality and leaving others unaddressed: “A specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable, for example, and subjects will be produced and act within that field of vision” (Rose 2016, chap. 8.1). Based on the assumption that discourses, much like national identity, are socially produced, visual discourse analysis examines “how those specific views or accounts are constructed as real or truthful or natural through particular regimes of truth” (Rose 2016, chap. 8.2.3).

4.1.2 Specification of the Methodological Approach

The visual discourse analysis outlined by Rose (2016) provides a comprehensive theory-based (interdependent) analytical framework, which, due to its modular structure, allows for a flexible adaptation to a wide range of research questions and perspectives. The analytical framework is structured around four sites – production, the image itself, audience, and circulation – within which three modalities (technological, compositional, and social) can be examined (Rose 2016, chap. 2).

The following analysis is guided by a strategic selection of intersections between sites and modalities that best align with the research objectives and the specific characteristics of the visual corpus.²³ This selection is grounded in their conceptual and methodological suitability for investigating how visual representations contribute to the construction of

²² Original: “[...]Untersuchung [...] Rückschlüsse auf den gesellschaftlichen Kontext ihrer Produktion.“

²³ The latter entails certain methodological limitations, for example, the lack of information regarding the creation of the representations in the nineteenth century or concerning the intentions and social contexts of the artists. Similarly, specific analytical approaches, such as examining modes of reception among audiences, fall outside the scope of this thesis, as such analyses would require empirical data that exceed the limits of the present work.

collective identity. In doing so, it is important to consider that the research questions examine how visual representations function, on the one hand, as expressions of the discourse on national identity and, on the other, as active agents within this discourse, thereby standing in a reciprocal, relationship (for detailed analytical steps cf. fig. 2):²⁴

Research Question a): By examining visual representations as discursive products, the analysis investigates the sociopolitical conditions in which they emerged. Therefore, following the methodology of visual discourse analysis, this research question is situated at the intersection of the site of production²⁵ and the social modality. While the site of production examines the sociopolitical conditions that influence the creation of visual representations, the social modality analyzes how these conditions are shaped by concrete social practices, power relations, and cultural contexts (Rose 2016, chap. 2.1; 2.2). This intersection allows for an analysis of the political, institutional, technical, and social conditions that enabled visual representations of the Gallic founding myth in the nineteenth century to function as communicative expressions of contemporary discourse.²⁶ Thus, the emergence of visual representations is situated within a context shaped by power relations, culture, and social norms, thereby providing a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Research Question b): The analytical focus lies on visual representations as agents within the discourse on national identity, exploring how images function as a medium through which the Gallic founding narrative is visually conveyed and communicated. Accordingly, the analysis engages directly with the medium – at the site of the image (Rose 2016, chap. 2.3). It investigates how compositional and artistic practices, together with the resulting visual-communicative strategies,

²⁴ While offering a structured approach to analysis, it is important to acknowledge those “sites” cannot be strictly separated from one another in practical analysis.

²⁵ Following Rose, the ‘site of production’ is to be understood not only as a historically situated context of origin, but as a discursive practice in which societal and political structures of meaning intertwine with visual form.

²⁶ This is consistent with Hobsbawm’s modernist approach to national identity (understood as an associated phenomenon of nationalism), which thus “must [...] be analysed in terms of political, technical, administrative, economic and other conditions and requirements” (Hobsbawm 1992, 10).

allow visual representations to participate in discourse as agents of identity construction.

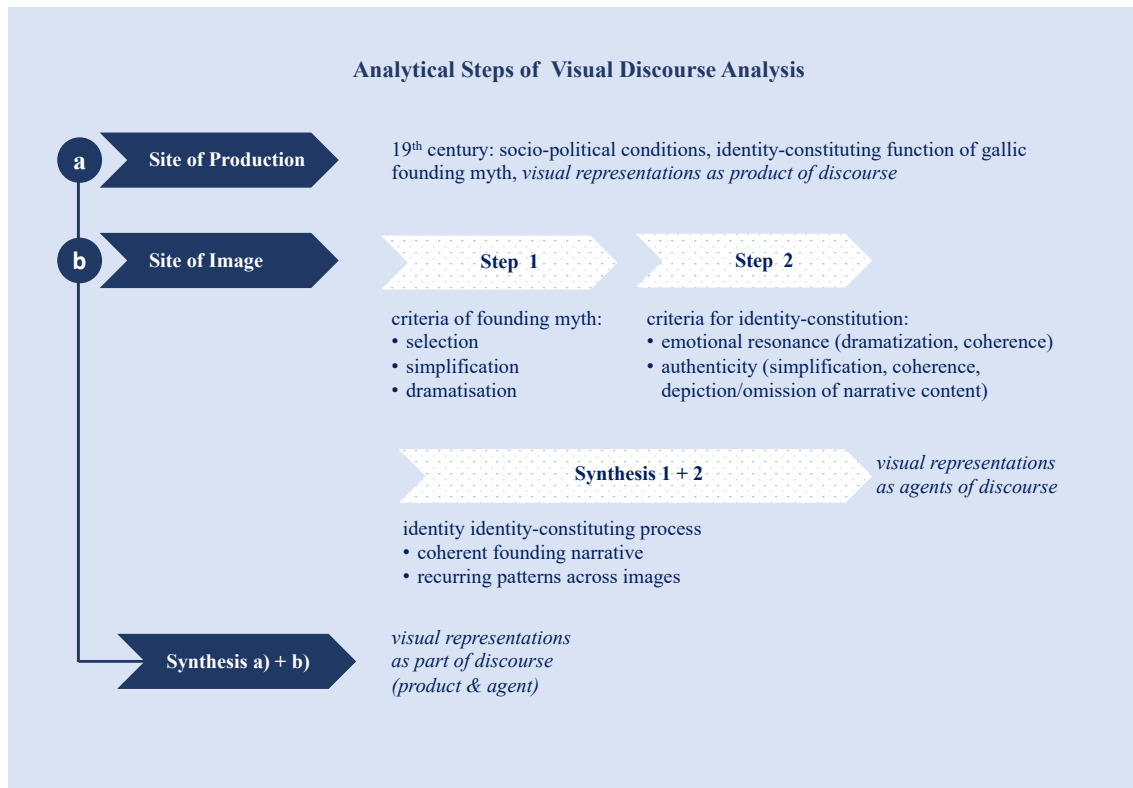


Fig. 2 Analytical Steps

Source: own illustration

4.2 Corpus and Selection of Visual Sources

The following analysis is based on a selection of seven visual representations of the Gallic founding myth, all of which date from the period between 1863 and 1899 (cf. tab. 1).²⁷

The selection of the examined visual representations is based on a self-compiled database containing over sixty works produced between 1796 and 1930 (cf. appendix). This image database was developed as part of an “exploratory preliminary study”, in which the material was systematically reviewed, analyzed for common characteristics, and grouped into clusters to facilitate a structured selection of works appropriate for analysis. The

²⁷ For two works, the period of origin was dated to the nineteenth century; however, the exact year of origin could not be determined.

database was compiled through extensive research, conducted primarily online.²⁸ For each visual representation, the following information was recorded where available: artist's name, title, year or period of creation, artistic form or medium, material and technique, place of production and current repository, exhibition venues, and source. This process also included an initial thematic screening of the material.

The selection of the specific visual material followed the systematic classification of entire corpus. The works were thereby initially classified by their narrative degree – referring to the extent to which they visually reflect or engage with the textually transmitted Gallic founding narrative (cf. chap. 2.3) as well as the degree of material/physical reduction (painting, statue, etc.).

This resulted in the formation of thematically coherent image clusters through the identification of recurring content-related themes. Consequently, the corpus was organized into the following thematic clusters: (1) depictions of the capitulation scene (paintings, drawings), (2) depictions of gallic warfare (paintings) (3) iconic depictions of Vercingétorix (paintings), (4) iconic depictions of Vercingétorix (sculpture and reliefs), (5) combined depictions with other national symbols/icons (such as Marianne or Joan of Arc) (6) scenes from everyday Gallic life (paintings).

For the selection of representations to be examined within the framework of the research question, these clusters were positioned within an analytical matrix defined by two axes: the degree of narrativity and the requirement for intertextuality (cf. fig. 3). This categorization suggests the following: The higher the narrative degree of a representation – that is, the more extensively and intricately it depicts figures, narrative themes, spatial organization, color and lighting schemes, and compositional movement – the more comprehensively it is able to evoke the actions and context of the founding myth. Conversely, the greater the material/physical limitation of an object – as is the case with statues – the less capable it is of depicting (linear) narrative action, thereby necessitating

²⁸ The procedure for compiling the corpus is broadly based on the “exploratory preliminary investigation” – as described in detail by Traue and Blanc (2018, 720–721) – in which the corpus is defined at the beginning of the analysis but can be expanded or restricted in the further course of the research process if new discursive formations are identified.

a greater reliance on symbolic condensation and intertextual references to convey meaning.

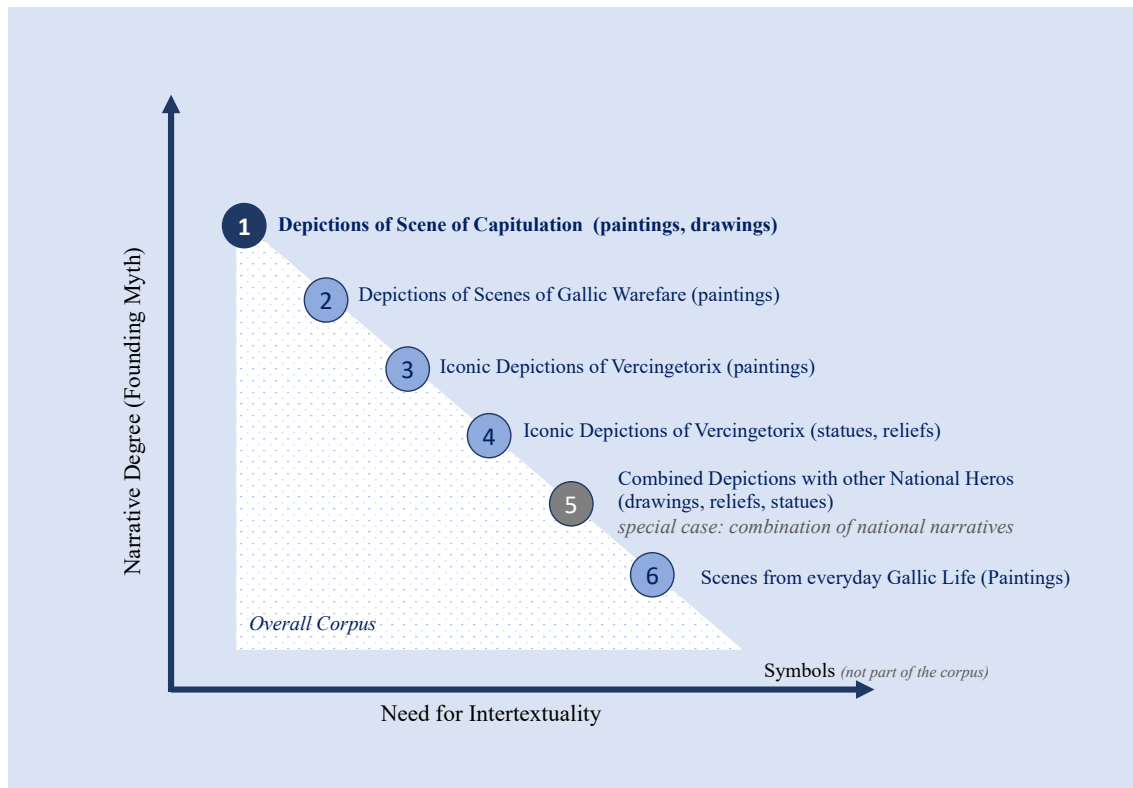


Fig. 3 Classification Matrix

Source: own illustration

Note: This figure is intended for illustrative purposes only. The precise positioning of the clusters within the matrix, as well as their linear arrangement, do not reflect actual conditions.

Following the Classification Matrix, the image category of the paintings of the capitulation scene (Cluster 1) occupies a central role: within the medium-specific constraints, these depictions exhibit the highest degree of narrativity, as they visualize a pivotal moment of the Gallic myth and thus establish a direct connection to the founding narrative. In doing so, they offer the most comprehensive visual articulation of the founding myth. All subsequent clusters, characterized by increasing visual reduction and decreasing narrative degree, engage with the myth only in fragmentary or symbolic ways – for instance, through representational elements such as the Gallic winged helmet – and no longer maintain a direct visual connection to the linear structure of the narrative. As a result, their meaning becomes progressively more reliant on historical and narrative context, rendering them increasingly dependent on intertextual references for interpretation.

The investigation of how visual representations serve as a medium for anchoring the founding myth in collective memory is conducted using Cluster 1, as this cluster exhibits the highest degree of narrativity. Cluster 1 enables a focused analysis of the contribution of visual representations to the anchoring of the founding myth in collective memory, since these depictions contain a clear, narratively elaborated reference to the myth. This obviates the need for a preliminary assessment of whether, and in what form, a symbolic or implicit reference to the myth exists-a step that would be necessary for more visually reduced or ambiguous representations. This methodological decision allows the research question to be addressed directly and without additional interpretive stages, as the narrative function of the depictions in the context of national identity formation can be assumed.

no.	Ttitle	Artist	Year of Production
1	Vercingétorix se rendant à César	Henri Paul Motte	1886
2	Vercingétorix devant César; Vercingétorix jette ses armes aux pieds de César	Lionel Royer	1899
3	Vercingetorix Throws Down His Arms At The Feet Of Julius Caesar	Emile Lévy	1863
4	Vercingétorix se rendant à César	Eliot Maurice	1885
5	Vercingétorix devant Jules César	Lantz, first name unknown (designer of the decoration and the model), Faïenceries de Creil & Montereau	1884-1920
6	Vercingétorix se rendant à César	Anonymous	19th century
7	Chef gaulois (Vercingétorix) déposant les armes devant un romain (César)	Gaston Bussière	4th quater of 19th century; 1st quater of 20th century

Tab. 1 Visual Representations of the Capitulation Scene (Cluster 1)

For more details, see the appendix.

The temporal focus on visual representations of the founding myth from the nineteenth century is methodologically and theoretically grounded, as this era offers a significant framework for analyzing how visual representations contribute to the process of national identity formation.

Drawing on the modernist conception of the nation, this process is located primarily in nineteenth-century France, when the nation-state emerged as a key reference point. The artistic and visual exploration of the Gallic founding myth during this era is of special interest, since the research question investigates how these representations were not merely products of the discourse surrounding the emergence of French national identity, but also played an active role in shaping it. Therefore, the focus on nineteenth century France allows for an examination of the founding myth during the historical period in which it was (first) established as a narrative capable of shaping national identity. The notable concentration of artistic representations referencing the Gallic founding myth during this period provides a sufficient number of works to identify the necessary common patterns within the methodological framework, while also underscoring the relevance of the temporal focus. Given the focus on the formative period of French identity construction²⁹, the analytical corpus is restricted to two- and three-dimensional artistic representations referencing the Gallic founding myth. Formats such as comics or films are not included in the analysis, as they adhere to different medial logics.

4.3 Operationalization

This thesis employs a qualitative methodology to investigate how visual representations of the Gallic founding myth in the nineteenth century contributed to the process of constructing national identity. The modernist approach serves as an integrative element, linking the theoretical framework with the methodological design. National identity is conceived as a social construct shaped through a continuous process of societal negotiation. Methodologically, the thesis adopts a visual discourse analysis, which conceptualizes images as part of social discourses that actively participate in the construction of social reality. Within this approach, the capacity of images to adapt to evolving interpretive frameworks and systems of values renders them especially effective

²⁹ From the perspective of this thesis' modernist and discourse-theoretical approach, French national identity is seen as the product of a dynamic social process, precluding the assignment of a precise date to its emergence. Consequently, the chosen temporal scope is intended for analytical focus, with an emphasis on the formative period of national identity construction.

within discursive processes, especially with regard to the construction and transformation of national identity.

This modernist approach presents the challenge of investigating immaterial processes. To elucidate the role of visual media in the process of national identity formation, the analysis is guided by a sequential model (cf. fig. 4), while fully acknowledging that the complex process of national identity formation is dynamic and that the effects of visual-compositional strategies largely unfold simultaneously.

In the theoretical part of the thesis, the sequential model follows a deductive approach: according to the modernist perspective on the formation of national identity, it is conceived as a shared understanding among members of an ‘imagined community,’ primarily shaped by collective memory. This collective memory functions as a point of communality and as the foundation for shared notions of identity, as it presents an intangible unifying element that constitutes community as such. Founding myths occupy a central role within this memory. They are both expressions of collective remembrance and thus integral components of national identity, while also actively shaping it. In their material, thus visually perceptible forms, they present physical *lieux de mémoire*. The stage model used in this work allows for an analytical understanding of the process by which immaterial, abstract notions of identity are rendered into material, visually accessible forms.

The focus of the analysis lies at the intersection of collective memory and founding myth. Drawing on the prior established relationship, this allows for an investigation into the role of the founding myth as a constitutive element of national identity. In the first step (Site of Production), the founding myth is examined as a product of specific social and political conditions, positioning it within the collective memory of nineteenth-century France. This classification serves as the basis for subsequent analysis of the ways in which visual representations participate in this process: With the founding myth established as part of collective memory, it becomes possible to investigate how visual media facilitate and influence this process.

The analysis adopts the stages of the sequential model in a mirrored fashion (Site of Image) to gradually situate the role of visual representations as discursive agents within the process of constructing national identity: The analysis begins by identifying the

narrative reference, aiming to clarify to what extent the respective images visually engage with the Gallic founding myth. This involves examining which core narrative elements are represented. In the second step, the focus shifts to analyzing the visual compositional techniques used to fulfill the fundamental requirements of an effective founding myth. The analysis highlights three key mechanisms: selection, simplification, and dramatization. Subsequently, the third step investigates how these visual strategies evoke emotional resonance and a sense of authenticity. The fourth step focuses on the mechanisms that facilitate the transition into collective memory, with particular attention given to the identification of recurring patterns across images. Once it has been established that visual representations contribute to embedding the founding myth within collective memory, the sequential analytical model enables a systematic inference regarding their role in the construction of national identity.

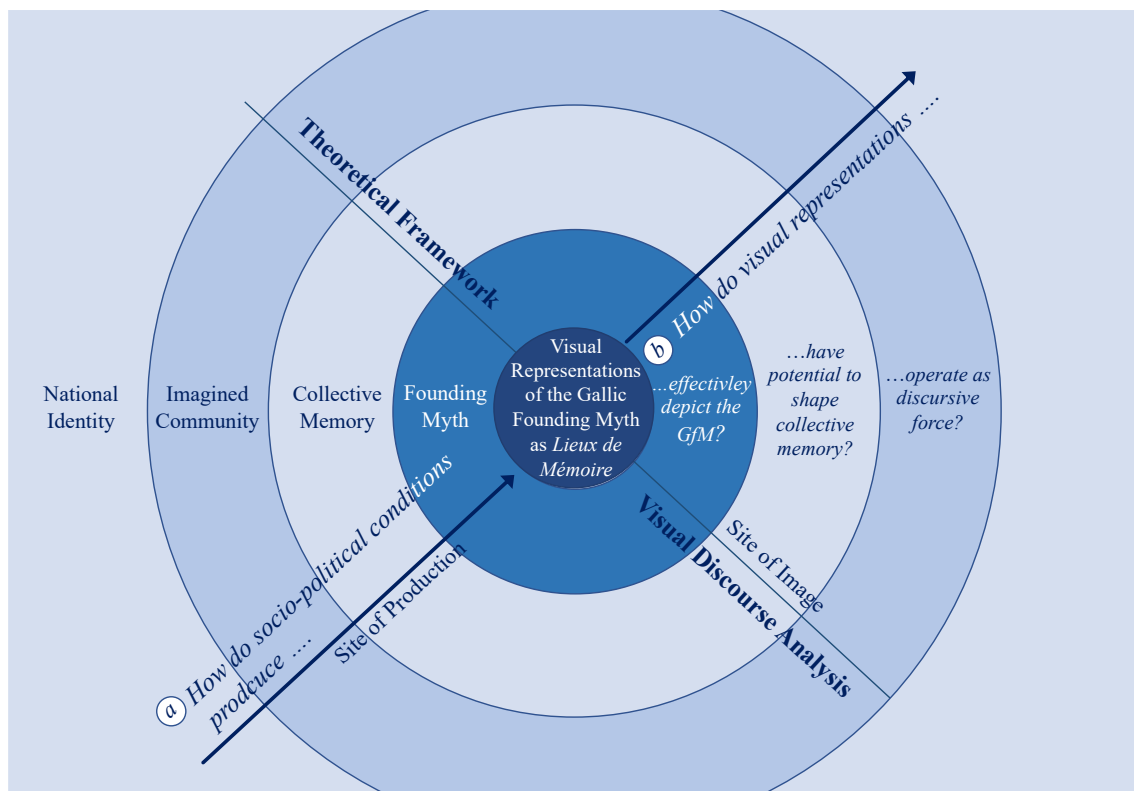


Fig. 4 Operationalisation

Source: own illustration

5 Analysis

The classification of the visual works in Cluster 1 as forms of expression of the discourse on national identity – research question a) – in 19th century France first requires a contextualization of the founding myth in the historical emergence of French national identity. This contextualization – especially in relation to political changes, institutional education policy and technological innovations – illustrates how and under what circumstances visual media could assume the role of active agents within this discourse – research question b).

5.1 Visual Representations of the Gallic Founding Myth as Product of Discourse

In order to examine how visual representations of the Gallic founding myth contribute to the construction of collective identity, the first part of the analysis focuses on a historical-discursive contextualization of the myth as an identity-forming. Rather than seeking to reconstruct a verifiable historical account of events, the focus lies on the sociopolitical conditions in which the Gallic founding myth emerged as an integrative element and the role of visual representations in embedding it within the collective memory (*site of production*) in the nineteenth-century.

Although the dynamic and fluid process of national identity formation presents a difficulty in defining a precise point in time for the emergence of French national identity, its origins are commonly traced back to the period following the French Revolution of 1789 (Baker 2012, 22; Safran 1991, 219). From the late 18th century to the end of the 19th century, especially during the Third Republic (1870-1940), France was characterized by profound political, social and ideological changes that are closely linked to the formation of a national identity (Baker 2012, 28).

Prior to the French Revolution, France lacked a coherent national identity. Collective identifications were primarily rooted in regional or local affiliations or tied to social class differences (Baker 2012, 22; Geary 2003, 64). The population was characterized by significant heterogeneity, particularly in terms of culture and language (Safran 1991, 220). While the Gallic founding myth took on an identity-forming function within this socio-cultural framework, it did not represent a nationally integrative element (Weber

1991, 22). Instead, it primarily served the ruling elites as an instrument to legitimize their power and uphold class distinctions. While the nobility justified its authority through claims of Roman and Frankish ancestry, the Third Estate, descending from the “boorish, churlish, rude” (Weber 1991, 21) Gauls, was marginalized and regarded as socially inferior (Weber 1991, 22; Geary 2003, 20). The defeat against the Romans in the Battle of Alesia was interpreted as ultimately beneficial for the civilizational development of France (Weber 1991, 22; Pucci 2006, 190). This widely accepted discourse was thus based on the deliberate exclusion of a particular social group, reflecting and simultaneously reinforcing the prevailing power structures of the time (Weber 1991, 22; Dietler 1994, 587).³⁰

The French Revolution (1789) and the period that followed led to a profound shift in both the structures of power and the prevailing public discourse (D’Auria 2020, 242). It resulted in a reinterpretation of the Gallic founding narrative, this time in support of the bourgeoisie’s claim to power. By referencing the founding narrative, the resistance against oppression and the defense of the rights of the people turned into a “moral duty” (Weber 1991, 33). The abolition of the monarchy, the establishment of the republic, and the broadening of citizenship appeared, by themselves, insufficient to cultivate a cohesive national identity, as French society continued to be profoundly divided along political, ideological, religious, and regional lines (Weber 1991, 23; Baker 2012, 22). France, therefore, represented a “classic case of the state preceding the nation and then having to forge a sense of national identity for an invented community of people who had little in common except a political bond and who did not even speak the same language” (Dietler 1994, 587). The confrontation with external threats acted as a catalyst in exposing the domestic instability and emphasizing the urgency of forging a collective identification with the nation. Its absence was reflected, in part, through the general reluctance to defend French territory (Tilly 1995, 224). From 1792/93 onward, France was at war with its neighboring states³¹ (Tilly 1995, 223), which perceived the Revolution as a threat to their

³⁰ An expression of this discourse can be found in written sources from the period, such as in the “influential historical writings of the Comte de Boulainvilliers (1727)” (Dietler 1994, 587).

³¹ For example, from 1792 to 1797, France was engaged in the War of the First Coalition (cf. Schroeder 1994, chapt. 3).

own political authority and domestic stability (Bukovansky 1999, 200). The conscription of the bourgeoisie into the army resulted in protests and resistance among the population (Tilly 1995, 224-225).

These socio-political conditions formed the essential basis for the establishment of the Gallic founding myth as a nationally integrative, unifying element. The formation of the nation-state as a political-administrative structure, along with the expansion of the concept of citizenship beyond formerly class-based boundaries, constituted the structural foundation for an integrative concept of national belonging. Within this context, the discursive establishment of a ‘collectively remembered past’ (*lieu de mémoire*) merged as a central means in forming the *imagined community*, and contributed both to domestic cohesion and to the legitimation of the nation-state in the international arena.

As a “legacy of the revolution” (Weber 1991, 21) , the founding myth was initially consolidated at the national level into a coherent national narrative “of a shared ethnic origin and common Gallic past” (D’Auria 2020, 3) which aimed to replace the diversity of local affiliations (Weber 1991, 23). This marked a shift in emphasis away from the function of Gallic origin as an instrument for internal class differentiation (Gauls vs. Romans/Franks) towards its role as an integrative element of the nation (Weber 1991, 31). As such, it was already firmly anchored in the discourse by the late 1830s: “By then, the idea that the Gauls were the ancestors of the modern French had turned into a banal assumption, an unquestioned cliché upon which rested the unity of the nation’s history” (D’Auria 2020, 3).³² The defeat against Prussia in the Third Republic entailed a heightened emphasis on Gallic origins within the collective memory (Gross 2005, 949; Pucci 2006, 192; Neves 2013, 638).³³

³² Focusing on the founding myth as an integrative element of national identity formation does not preclude its simultaneous function as a tool of exclusion, oppression, and the legitimation of power. The Gallic origin was employed to legitimize French colonial rule as well as anti-semitism (Weber 1991, 32; 35). Due to the thematic scope of this thesis, these aspects will not be examined. Instead, the myth is examined primarily in its function as an “integrative instrument that nourished a nationalist rhetoric and was nourished by it in turn, thereby helping to contain and defuse social and political conflict” (D’Auria 2020, 4).

³³ This suggests a possible connection to the desire to reframe or reinterpret a military defeat (Pucci 2006, 192).

Alongside innovative technological developments and dissemination through the media (e.g. through literary and artistic contributions), institutional measures acted as catalysts in this process, all of which contributed significantly to the dissemination and visibility of the myth in the public sphere.³⁴ The widespread use of the printing press as a mass medium, along with improvements in transport infrastructure – most notably the expansion of the railway system – made information accessible to broad segments of the population (Baker 2020, 23).³⁵ Institutional drivers included, in particular, the introduction of mass education (with compulsory schooling introduced in 1882), the establishment of military conscription, and the development of a centralized administration (Baker 2012, 22-23; D’Auria 2020, 4). Particularly during the Third Republic, the use of history – and thus the reference to a Gallic origin – as a didactic instrument within the education system served both to consolidate national unity and to cultivate a loyal, dutiful citizenry (D’Auria 2020, 4). References to Gallic origins had already been integrated into the school curriculum earlier (Weber 1991, 31), as seen for instance in the widely used textbook *Petit Lavis* (first published in 1876), which portrayed the Gauls as the direct ancestors of the French (Gross 2005, 949). In addition, the founding of the *Académie Celtique* in 1805 by Napoleon Bonaparte³⁶ contributed to the integration of the founding myth into the academic and cultural discourse of the time through a systematic institutional funding of the engagement with Gallic history and culture (Dietler 1994, 588; McCain 2022, 677). Further, the Gallic founding myth found expression in the scholarly discourse, through works, such as Thierry’s *Histoire des Gaulois* (1828), in which he positioned Vercingétorix as the “first national hero” and the Gauls as “ancient French men” (Pucci 2006, 191). His work proved particularly influential, presenting a source of inspiration for numerous subsequent engagements with Gallic history (Pucci 2006, 191; Weber 1991, 29). This consolidation of a national

³⁴ Although there was a brief surge in interest in the Frankish heritage during the Bourbon Restoration (1815-1830) this did not persist (Dietler 1994, 588).

³⁵ This corresponds to the modernist perspective, which emphasizes the crucial role of dissemination processes in the formation of the nation-state. Within the framework of visual discourse analysis, the conditions and mechanism that facilitated the spread of the myth fall under the *site of circulation*. However, this dimension is not addressed in the scope of this thesis.

³⁶ While Napoleon Bonaparte acknowledged and actively promoted the Gallic founding myth as part of a shared past (cf. *Académie Celtique*), he was also deeply inspired by Julius Caesar, both as a statesman and a military leader (Pucci 2006, 190, 192).

narrative – shaped by historians such as Thierry, Lavisse, Guizot and Martin (Dietler 1994, 588) – while simultaneously marginalizing alternative memories, thereby represents one of the central ideological accomplishments of the Third Republic (D’Auria 2020, 4).

In addition to scholarly discourse, the Gallic founding narrative found expression in literature and art, such as in Eugène Sue’s national novel *Les Mystères du peuple* (1856) and Honoré de Balzac’s novella *Le Cabinet des Antiques* (1838) (Dietler 1994, 587–588; Weber 1991, 26–27; Pucci 2006, 191). Artistic engagements with the Gallic founding narrative in the visual arts – particularly painting and sculpture – served as a reflection of societal debates surrounding the myth and contributed to its visibility in the public sphere. In cases of commissioned works, such as the Vercingétorix monument created by Millet in 1865 under the patronage of Napoleon III, these artistic productions were consciously employed as symbolic-political instruments within the framework of identity politics (Dietler 1994, 584; McCain 2022, 675; Pucci 2006, 192).

Despite the strong prominence of the Gallic founding myth, the Roman heritage of France was never completely negated.³⁷ The relationship between the Roman and Gallic legacies proved to be ambivalent and subject to ongoing transformation. Throughout the nineteenth century, interpretations varied depending on political affiliation, ideological orientation, and historical context. This gave rise to a productive tension: The Roman heritage symbolized civilizational progress, institutional order, and linguistic unity – particularly within the republican framework following the Revolution – whereas the Gallic origin conveyed an “emotionally charged sense of ethnic community” (Dietler 1994, 588), thus addressing the affective dimension of national belonging.

The emergence of the Gallic founding myth – and subsequently the production of its visual representations – was closely tied to specific social, cultural, and political conditions in nineteenth-century France. The establishment and diffusion of the myth in this era were catalyzed by intersecting factors including internal and external political

³⁷ While the period under investigation did not witness a complete rejection of the Roman legacy – the Roman conquest is acknowledged within the narrative itself (Caesar’s victory) – the subsequent integration of Gaul is largely omitted – particularly due to the selective focus on a specific historical episode (cf. chap. 5.2.1).

power dynamics, institutional state mechanisms, technological progress, and various forms of artistic expression: Educational institutions disseminated the founding myth, while the media landscape ensured its accessibility; academic authorities endorsed its authenticity, and technological innovations enabled its broad distribution. This synergy helped to anchor the myth within the collective memory, fostering “a community that was imagined historically, binding generations that read and memorized the same story” (D’Auria 2020, 1).

This is strongly reflected in the temporal accumulation of the visual representations of the corpus: While only isolated representations can be identified prior to 1830, a significant increase becomes evident from the July Monarchy (1814 – 1830) onward. The number of visual representations notably intensifies during the Second Empire (1852 – 1870) and the Third Republic (1870 – 1940), especially with regard to Cluster 1. Within the analyzed sociopolitical context, this development allows for an interpretation of these depictions of the founding myth during this period as products of discourse. This, in turn, suggests that the myth was firmly established within the collective memory and thus functioning as a unifying element of the nation. In this respect, these works form a suitable foundation for the second level of analysis, which investigates how visual representations of the Gallic founding myth contribute to the formation and stabilization of national identity.

5.2 Visual Representations of the Gallic Founding Myth as Discursive Agents

The investigation of how visual representations establish the founding myth in collective memory – that is, how they function as agents in the discourse—requires a direct engagement with the medium, thus at the site of the image (Rose, 2016). Drawing on the previously established theoretical premise that emotional resonance and authenticity are essential for the founding myth’s identity-forming impact, the following section investigates how these prerequisites are established through visual-communicative strategies and techniques. The initial focus centers on the visual realization of simplification, selection, and dramatization as the basis for emotional resonance and authenticity (cf. chap. 3.3) (Part I). Subsequently, the analysis explores how these visual

techniques and strategies establish emotional resonance and authenticity, thereby anchoring the myth within collective memory (Part II).

5.2.1 Strategies for Visual Establishment of the Founding Myth

The analysis of the visual representations from Cluster 1 follows a structured approach that aims to identify consistent visual-strategic patterns³⁸ and conceptual contexts. The focus lies on the investigation of how the central motif of the founding myth manifests itself in terms of content and theme and how the selection, simplification and dramatization of the historical event is created through visual means (cf. chap. 3.3).

Visual Construction of the Founding Narrative: Selection of the Scene of Surrender

The inherent physical limitations of the examined visual representations alongside their static character, impact their narrative capacity. This not only necessitates the selection of a particular scene but also requires a significant condensation of information and thus a further simplification of the narrative. The images in Cluster 1 consistently depict the same pivotal moment in the sequence of the founding narrative, presenting the motif of Vercingetorix's "Moment of Surrender"³⁹ through a visual juxtaposition of Vercingetorix and Julius Caesar/the Romans.⁴⁰ Thus, the selection of the dramatic excerpt falls on the key episode of the founding myth, while simultaneously enabling the depiction of the central protagonists. The depicted temporal excerpt consistently centers on the moment of surrender or its immediate proximity. The Gallic leader is uniformly positioned in the foreground – either on horseback or standing – while the inclusion of the Roman army and, in some cases, additional Gallic warriors, together with the setting in a symbolically charged environment evocative of Alesia (characterized by features such as hills and fortifications), enables further contextualization of this moment within the broader

³⁸ While the analysis centers on recurring and recognizable patterns, slight variations are discernible, reflecting the non-identical nature of the images.

³⁹ The identification of this scene as a narrative component of the myth necessitates intertextuality.

⁴⁰ In image 1 (cf. appendix) Caesar can only be inferred from a distance, however he is symbolically represented by the clearly identifiable red pedestal.

narrative. This choice of motif is reinforced and contextualized in the titles of the images, such as *'Vercingétorix se rendant à César'* (see tab. 1).

Thus, the selection of the scenic motif establishes a consistent visual pattern across the images, which is further reinforced textually through the image titles; this motif not only exemplifies the narrative construction of the Gallic founding myth but also provides essential narrative contextualization.

Constructing Centrality: Vercingétorix as a Visual and Narrative Focal Point

In addition to the selection of the depicted scene, the examined cluster reveals consistent patterns in the depiction of Vercingétorix as the leader of the Gallic tribes and as a representative of the Gallic collective.⁴¹ Certain visual attributes enable a distinct identification of him as a Gaul: a tall and muscular stature, long (wild) blond or red hair, the typical 'Gallic' long mustache, and characteristic dress and armor, including leg bands, a sash, and a winged helmet. His equipment, including a richly adorned horse, lavish armor, and noble garments, points to his rank as a Gallic chieftain.

Building on this visual emphasis on his importance as the leader of the Gauls, a series of recurring compositional strategies are employed to guide the perspective. These position him as the central focus of the depiction, such as through his central and dominant placement in the foreground of the image, an upright and dignified posture, active gestures, and a tall, muscular physique. In addition, he is further visually accentuated through an elevated placement – whether shown on horseback or standing – which physically positions him at eye level with, or above Caesar. Vercingétorix's centrality is not only established from an external viewpoint (on the image) but is also reinforced within the composition by the surrounding figures: all depicted protagonists – including Caesar – direct their gaze towards Vercingétorix, thereby creating a visual hierarchy that positions him as the decisive figure driving the action.

The figure of Vercingétorix is not only emphasized compositionally, but also appears as the only active actor in an otherwise static scene. Within the representations,

⁴¹ The few Gauls additionally depicted adopt similar features to Vercingétorix in their visual composition, which creates a stylized homogenization.

Vercingétorix is granted a symbolic scope of action in two distinct ways: firstly, through the contrasting depiction of the surrounding figures, who remain passive, often distant, and do not actively intervene in the action. Secondly, through the open space depicted in the image – bounded only laterally by the soldiers standing in formation and the palisades – that visually leaves room for the possibility of alternative actions (such as flight or attack). Since this presented opportunity is consciously rejected by the clear visual indication of the surrender of arms, the capitulation is portrayed as an act of self-determination. This is further accentuated by Vercingétorix's control over the unruly, resistant horse, which opposes the act of surrender and thus symbolically underscores his deliberate agency and self-determination in the moment of capitulation.

The grammatical structure of the titles, which cast Vercingétorix as the active subject rather than the passive object of the depicted event, underscores his agency and intentionality in the act of surrender (“Vercingétorix Throws Down His Arms At The Feet Of Julius Caesar”; “Vercingétorix surrenders to Caesar”⁴²)⁴³ – an effect that is further reinforced by the consistent use of active verb forms.

Therefore, Vercingétorix is portrayed – through compositional-visual techniques and linguistic coding (titles) – as a self-determined and agency-bearing central figure. This results in a shift in narrative perspective, clearly establishing him as the focal point.

Visual Power Dynamics: The Individual Hero Versus the Anonymous Collective

In the examined visual representations, Caesar and the Roman collective are portrayed in a distinctly contrasting manner to Vercingétorix. Although Caesar is clearly presented as a militarily superior emperor – accentuated by visual markers such as a throne or pedestal, a red cloth, a laurel wreath, and the overwhelming number and orderly presence of his legionaries – he is assigned a secondary and passive role in the compositional hierarchy of the images. Positioned spatially in the background and depicted with a disengaged expression – seated in a relaxed posture, without interaction – he is depicted as a distant, static, or even emotionless ruler. The Roman soldiers are

⁴² Original: “Vercingétorix jette ses armes aux pieds de César; Vercingétorix se rendant à César.”

⁴³ An illustrative counterexample to this argument would be: “Caesar accepts Vercingétorix's surrender.”

portrayed in a stereotypical manner as a uniform and militarized collective. The detailed depiction of their typical military equipment (Roman shields, swords, breastplates, etc.) not only allows for a clear cultural attribution, but also alludes to discipline, structural organization, and military efficiency. Additional recurring attributes – such as short hairstyles, clean-shaven faces, or neatly trimmed beards – reinforce the image of a civilized and orderly military culture. The military standards and banners further underscore the hierarchical organization of the Roman army. Apart from Caesar, the Roman soldiers are depicted as a homogeneous group. Their standardized appearance and behavior promote a visual uniformity that neglects individuality. Their passive, statuesque presence and the lack of facial or gestural variation generate emotional distance, create an emotional distance that further contributes to their anonymization. This visual coding – marked by numerical superiority and framed by symbols of power such as standards, lances, and palisades – highlights the organizational and military dominance of the Roman forces, while compromising emotional engagement through individuality.

This visual composition renders the Romans, as a collective, into an almost anonymous and passive presence. Through the stark contrast in the depiction of the two central protagonists – each serving as a symbolic representative of their respective groups – Vercingétorix is visually elevated to the status of a self-determined hero, while the military dominance of the Roman forces is simultaneously acknowledged.

Visual Rhetoric of Surrender: Dramatization Through Compositional Techniques

In the selected capitulation scene, the visual representations consistently construct a dramatized portrayal of the action. The military defeat is depicted as a ritualized act of surrender, by highlighting Vercingétorix' voluntary and self-sacrificial act on behalf of the collective (his people). Within this context, the depicted physical space assumes a central symbolic function: it emphasizes the ritualization of the act by isolating the laying down of arms and placing it at the center, thereby conferring a moral and emotional significance to the scene. This dramatization is intensified by the direction of the figures' gazes: the direct eye contact between Caesar and Vercingétorix, as well as the gazes of the other statically posed figures directed toward Vercingétorix, focus attention on the pivotal act of capitulation and create a tense atmosphere of anticipation. Simultaneously, additional

compositional devices – such as chiaroscuro contrasts, a partially obscured sky, and the dynamic posture of Vercingétorix’s nearly uncontrollable horse – underscore the dramatic character of the scene.

The depiction of the military capitulation as the laying down of arms within a symbolic, ritualized space, combined with additional techniques such as directed gazes, chiaroscuro contrasts, and the dynamic posture of the horse, creates a visual tension that leads to the dramatization of the portrayed scene.

Within the visual representations of Cluster 1, distinct strategic patterns emerge across the images: centering on the capitulation scene as the narrative’s pivotal moment, the visual representations convey a clear and coherent storyline, visually rendered through repeating compositionally analogous motifs. This strategy results in a reduction of complexity, further simplified by the clear juxtaposition and delineation of the acting figures and reinforced through stereotypical portrayals. The visual composition establishes a clear perspective, directing narrative emphasis to the central figure and pivotal action within the scene. By staging the military defeat within a ritualized framework of surrendering arms, the depicted narrative attains a heightened level of dramatic intensity. The analysis shows that the visual representations in Cluster 1 employ strategies of selection, simplification, and dramatization inherent to their medium. These strategies are fundamental to eliciting emotional resonance and authenticity, and are therefore instrumental in forging a shared collective identity.

5.2.2 From Military Defeat to Moral Victory: Visual Strategies of Narrative Reinterpretation

Based on the premise that the establishment of authenticity and emotional resonance constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for anchoring the founding narrative within collective memory (cf. chap. 3.3), the following part examines how these two aspects are created through visual means in the selected capitulation scene. These effects rely on the identified representational strategies shaped by processes of selection, simplification, and dramatization (cf. chap. 5.2.1), which reduce the complexity of the historical narrative and thereby enhance both emotional resonance and conceptual accessibility.

The material restriction of the visual representations in Cluster 1 to a single, brief sequence of the founding myth – the capitulation – necessitates a thematic condensation of the narrative within this segment. This simplification, in which the historical action is condensed and explanatory context omitted, facilitates a clear and accessible narrative. However, the deliberate focus on the moment of military defeat constitutes a fundamental weakness regarding its potential for collective identification. Although the capitulation constitutes a fixed component of the Gallic founding myth, a military defeat in itself holds limited potential to serve as a collectively unifying element of the nation, especially in relation to establishing the notion of “a heroic past with great men and glory” (Renan, 1882). At the same time, this defeat – which constitutes a historically ‘recognized’ element – cannot be omitted since its denial would undermine the plausibility and credibility of the narrative and thus its perceived authenticity. While other moments within the narrative – such as the unification of the Gallic tribes or the temporary military successes of the Gallic army– might fundamentally appear more suitable for a visual depiction of the founding myth, these would inevitably be relativized by the subsequent (and known) defeat and thus weakened in their identity-forming impact. In order to evoke emotional resonance within their (material) limitation, visual representations draw on strategic visual techniques to establish the necessary prerequisites for the myth’s integrative and meaning-making function. In this regard, the re-evaluation of the capitulation scene emerges as the central strategy.

Narrative Reinterpretation in Three Stages: The Visual Construction of Moral Victory

In the examined representations, emotional resonance is established through a reinterpretation of military defeat as a moral victory. At the core of this narrative lies the implicit message: Central to this is the implicit assertion that: *It is preferable to triumph morally than to prevail militarily.*

The intentional display (visibility) of the military defeat provides the foundation for its symbolic transformation, as its acknowledgment constitutes the prerequisite for its “authentic” identity-constituting impact/reinterpretation. This results in two central requirements: The reinterpretation must, on the one hand, foster emotional resonance to enable collective identification, and, on the other, maintain narrative authenticity,

ensuring that the depicted aligns with the perception of a credible and ‘historically’ plausible narrative.

The following analysis is structured as a sequential process, providing an analytical framework that enables a systematic examination of the reinterpretation:⁴⁴ Therefore, the transformation of the military defeat into a moral victory is divided into three distinct visual-analytical stages. First, two separate dimensions of power – military and moral – are established through visual means. Second, these dimensions are juxtaposed, employing visual strategies that enable their clear identification and differentiation. Third, a visual hierarchy is constructed that privileges the moral dimension over the military.

These distinct stages are based on the operative mechanisms of the visual strategies identified in Analysis I – simplification, selection, and dramatization – which, in combination, contribute to the construction of a coherent narrative (cf. chap. 5.2.1).

In the first stage, the analysis focuses on the visual introduction of an additional layer of power: military power, which can be depicted through tangible symbols such as the presence of armies or weaponry, is contrasted with a moral dimension of power – comprised of intangible values such as steadfastness, integrity, and willingness to make sacrifices. The visual portrayal of Romans draws on symbolic and compositional tangible elements and strategies to present them as a numerically superior, highly disciplined, and hierarchically organized military force. The portrayal of the soldiers as a uniform, technically equipped, and physically intact collective visually underscores the organizational sophistication and dominance of the Roman military, effectively conveying their supremacy through imagery. In contrast to military power, moral strength constitutes an abstract intangible concept and therefore proves difficult to visualize directly. This necessitates specific compositional strategies that make moral power visually perceptible – an essential prerequisite for subsequent processes of juxtaposition and hierarchization. This is achieved by imposing moral authority to a tangible visual

⁴⁴ Although the following discussion is presented in a linear, step-by-step sequence, it is important to note that visual representations do not adhere to the linear structure. In contrast to written narratives, which convey a chronological sequence, elements in visual representations unfold simultaneously.

object: within the visual representations, Vercingétorix serves as the principal embodiment of moral authority. This is accomplished through a deliberate perspectival shift, the portrayal of Vercingétorix as an agentive figure, and the heroic elevation of his character.

The shift in narrative perspective is crucial for attributing agency to Vercingétorix, thereby positioning him as the driving force within the unfolding action. At the same time, this perspectival shift reorients the narrative focus: whereas a depiction from the Roman viewpoint would primarily underscore Roman military supremacy and Gallic subjugation, the chosen perspective foregrounds Vercingétorix's agency and significance. Instead, the defeat is represented through the ritualized act of surrendering arms, thereby facilitating its interpretation as an assertion of dignity and self-determination rather than as an expression of weakness. This depiction of surrender as an act of self-determination (for the Gallic collective) allows Vercingétorix to uphold both his agency and his personal integrity. This distinct visual interpretation is vital for the elevation of Vercingétorix as a hero. Vercingétorix is portrayed not as a passive, subordinate object of surrender, but rather as a consciously acting subject who willingly and actively sacrifices himself for the collective. This representation implies that his choice is motivated by personal conviction rather than compulsion, visually suggesting that, in principle, alternative courses of action would be possible. Thus, he is elevated to a self-sacrificing hero who, by means of his autonomous action, maintains his personal integrity and symbolically advocates for the common good. This transforms the moment of surrender into an act of moral sovereignty.

This depiction of self-determined action and moral fortitude in the ritualized act of surrendering arms serves to establish the moral dimension of power. The depiction of this specific act serves to transform Vercingétorix into an emblem of moral superiority. Thus, Vercingétorix he does not merely present a hero endowed with agency, but as the symbolic embodiment of the moral dimension of power. Consequently, each visual or narrative juxtaposition represents not only a contrast between individuals or groups, but also an opposition between distinct levels of power. In this way, the moral dimension of power is seamlessly integrated into the visual narrative.

This enables the juxtaposition of the two dimensions of power – military and moral – which, in turn, constitutes the central prerequisite for their subsequent hierarchization. The juxtaposition is achieved through the visual establishment of a binary system that relies on a deliberate reduction of complexity – both in terms of assigning the depicted actors to their respective collectives and to their corresponding dimensions of power. Within this binary system, the two opposing groups – Romans and Gauls (represented by Vercingétorix) – can be clearly identified and distinguished from one another by their visual attributes. By attributing only one dimension of power to each ‘collective’, this structuring dichotomy excludes possible ambivalences and relativisations, simplifies visual and narrative complexity, and establishes the basis for a symbolic reinterpretation of power.

The visual juxtaposition of the two dimensions of power results in a hierarchy that places moral integrity above strength. Rather than following a binary ‘good vs. evil’ logic, this process is intended to facilitate a targeted reinterpretation of military defeat. While the Roman military triumph is visually affirmed rather than undermined (thus safeguarding the authenticity and impact of the myth), it is simultaneously set against a superior moral standard.

The supremacy of moral over military power thereby results from a complex interplay of visual and symbolic mechanisms. The compositional staging of Vercingétorix – his dominant positioning within the image – presents a means of hierarchization. The moral power embodied by Vercingétorix is visually and thus symbolically elevated above Roman military dominance through the visual composition. Through the pictorial focus on his figure and its central positioning, the moral principle becomes the focal point of the representation, whereas Roman military power – depicted as a faceless crowd in the background – is visually and symbolically relegated to the background. The portrayal of military defeat as a voluntary sacrifice for the collective, coupled with the hero’s intact physical presence and resilient spirit, serves to highlight his agency. He is granted both physical and symbolic space for choice and action, which diverges from the expectation of the portrayal of the defeated. The explicit visual emphasis on his agency, his ability to act with autonomy in the midst of adversity, strongly suggests that his moral integrity is not compromised by military defeat.

The ritualized depiction of capitulation through the laying down of arms imparts an almost institutional character to the act. The Romans' formal recognition and legitimization of this moment – conveyed by their provision of physical space and abstention from direct physical interaction – serves as a symbolic acknowledgment of moral authority by the militarily dominant party. By visually contrasting physical (military) power with immaterial (moral) power, the visual narrative establishes a symbolic hierarchy in which moral authority, as an abstract principle, escapes the confines of physical defeat and asserts its superiority over military power. The symbolic reinterpretation of the capitulation scene thus elevates Vercingétorix to the status of a morally superior protagonist – his defeat becomes the very foundation of his moral ascendancy. In this manner, military loss is reframed as a moral triumph.

The Visual Establishment of Emotional Resonance and Authenticity

Through the symbolic reinterpretation of the capitulation scene, the visual depictions succeed in generating emotional resonance and addressing the potential lack of identification stemming from the Gauls' military defeat. Vercingétorix, who appears as the moral victor through visual-compositional strategies and serves symbolically as the “personified” embodiment of collective values, offers a positive emotional focal point for identification. The dramatic intensification of the hero's individual tragedy, as he acts contrary to expectations, appears especially effective on an emotional level, particularly against the backdrop of military defeat.

Narrative coherence in the visual representations is achieved not only through what is depicted, but also through what is omitted. The latter refers not only to the exclusion of narrative segments adjacent to the capitulation scene, but also to elements that are deliberately left “unvisualized” within the staged scene itself (such as the absence of wounded Roman soldiers). Such selectivity serves to preclude potential contradictions and alternative readings that could undermine or challenge the heroic decision and moral integrity of Vercingétorix.

The omission of certain elements also contributes to establishing the highly simplified binary system. Within a starkly contrasting juxtaposition (Romans vs. Gauls, military vs. moral power, anonymous vs. individual), the Roman collective serves a demarcating

function. This role arises from their depiction as embodying solely military power, anonymity, and detachment, thereby preventing any ambivalence: Neither moral attributes are assigned to the Romans, nor is there a nuanced portrayal of the Gauls. This solidifies the hierarchy between the two dimensions of power, as it allows for the portrayal of Vercingétorix as the exclusive (and superior) representative of the moral dimension.

Through the reinterpretation of the capitulation scene – conveyed via compositional and visual strategies – the visual representations display consistent patterns that render the “heroic past with great men and glory” (Renan 1882) accessible as a coherent narrative, both visually and emotionally. In doing so, they transform the Gallic founding myth into a form that is both perceptible and emotionally resonant, which constitutes a prerequisite for collective identification. By visualizing – and thereby acknowledging – military defeat, the examined representations reinforce a sense of authenticity. The explicit depiction of (a known and acknowledged) defeat, rather than its omission or denial, conveys the impression of portraying a ‘real’ historical event, which increases the credibility of the representation and amplifies its emotional and narrative impact.

Additionally, authenticity arises from the visual construction of narrative coherence, whereby the founding narrative is condensed into a clear and accessible episode. The focus on the central event and the two clearly identifiable protagonists allows for the affirmation of the depicted within the already familiar founding narrative. This process relies on intertextuality, as the image deliberately corresponds with other visual and/or textual media, thereby creating a sense of recognition that lends authenticity to the depicted. By drawing on familiar narrative patterns, the depiction engages existing knowledge and thereby reinforces the credibility of the staging.

Alongside compositional and visual techniques, the distinctive painting style – that is, the specific artistic execution – further enhances the sense of authenticity. The realistic and highly detailed visual ‘language’ reinforces the illusion of an ostensibly objective “historical truth.” By depicting historically plausible details – such as clothing, equipment, and surroundings – the representations cultivate an impression of historical factuality. Contextual elements like the battlefield, fortress, or limes establish a setting

that appears authentic and, through historical and spatial localization, fosters a sense of familiarity and recognition.

Despite their medium-specific limitations, the visual representations employ strategic approaches that evoke emotional resonance and authenticity, thereby establishing the prerequisites for the identity-forming effect of the Gallic founding myth. These approaches consistently appear across all images in Cluster 1, facilitating visual recognizability of the depicted narrative. However, the emphasis is not on formal uniformity (i.e., identical image composition) but rather on maintaining narrative coherence throughout the images. Each representation visually constructs the same reimagined narrative, resulting in an emergent pattern across the images. This enables the analyzed images to be understood as active agents in the discourse on collective origins: They not only reproduce the narrative but also actively participate in structuring and stabilizing the depicted reality – through processes of repetition, coherence, and condensation—and can thus be regarded as integral components of the social production of meaning.

6 Discussion

In examining the research question of how visual representations of the Gallic founding myth emerged as an expression of national identity in 19th century France, the preceding analysis concludes that the myth constituted – a *lieu de memoire* – a socially integrative element within the imagined community. While the myth existed prior to the nineteenth century, it was primarily in the context of significant political and social transformations – especially surrounding the emergence of the nation-state – that it evolved into an instrument for the formation of national identity. This development supports the modernist perspective on nation-building, according to which national identity constitutes a phenomenon of “recent historical developments” (cf. chap. 3). Accordingly, the development of the Gallic myth as an instrument of identity formation corresponds to those conditions – such as the centralization of state power, the emergence of modern means of communication, and educational institutions – which modernist approaches identify as fundamental to the development of national identities (cf. Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990). Given that the Gallic founding myth constituted an

integral component of the identity-forming discourse during the period examined, and that the analyzed visual representations (Cluster 1) all originate from this era and render the myth visually (cf. chap. 4.2), it can be inferred that the depictions of the capitulation scene arose as expressions of nineteenth-century discourse.

In the process of constructing collective memory, visual representations of the Gallic founding myth assume a dual role they are, on the one hand, expressions and thus products of this dynamic process of negotiation; on the other hand, they actively contribute to its ongoing formation. Thus, their significance thus extends beyond merely reflecting prevailing nineteenth-century notions of a shared Gallic origin. Rather, they function as active agents in anchoring the founding myth within nineteenth-century national identity, actively participating in the ongoing construction and renegotiation of the collective perception of the past. On this basis, the second research question centers on a close examination of how visual representations contribute to establishing the myth as a shared, remembered past by means of compositional techniques and communicative strategies that enable its collective and identity-forming assimilation.

As a preliminary finding, the analysis of the image sites reveals that the examined representations employ consistent strategies of selection, simplification, and dramatization in their depiction of the Gallic founding myth. These strategies are essential to the efficacy of the narrative as a vehicle for identity formation. Due to the inherent constraints of the visual medium, the analyzed representations necessarily engage in a high degree of selection. This selection pertains not only to the choice of a specific moment within the action of the founding narrative, but also to the selection and visual rendering of what is depicted within that moment. Consequently, the (few) chosen visual elements assume a particularly significant role with regard to their narrative impact. Starting from the selection of the capitulation scene as the narrative's pivotal moment, the visual representations effectively communicate a coherent and readily comprehensible narrative by employing stereotypical character arrangements and a distinct perspective (visual "storytelling") from the standpoint of the moral hero. The deliberate staging of the central protagonists, as well as intertextually anchored, recognizable elements, enables an unambiguous contextualization and classification of the depicted motif within the broader storyline of the Gallic founding myth. This indicates

that the visual representations, through the use of compositional strategies, effectively constitute the Gallic founding myth as a coherent and recognizable narrative that facilitates identity formation.

In order to evoke emotional resonance and authenticity – as prerequisites for embedding founding myths within identity-forming discourses – the examined representations employ a deliberate strategy of reinterpretation: through visual and compositional means, a moral dimension is superimposed onto anonymous and detached portrayal of military power. By depicting the capitulation as a ritualized surrender of arms within a tension-filled space, the military defeat is symbolically recast as a moral victory. This reinterpretation not only generates emotional resonance but also enhances the depiction's authenticity. By visually acknowledging rather than concealing defeat, the representations foster 'historical' credibility, a perception reinforced through formal conventions and that situate the scene within an "authentic" historical past.

The analysis of the site of image reveals consistent strategic patterns across the examined depictions of the capitulation scene. These visual strategies effectively present the Gallic founding myth as a coherent, emotionally resonant, and seemingly authentic origin narrative – forming a crucial basis for collective identification. These recurring patterns provide the principal explanatory basis for the contribution of visual representations of the Gallic founding myth to the formation of French national identity in the nineteenth century.

Although images may appear static as material artifacts, their reception is highly dynamic, as they are continually subject to reinterpretation and can be embedded within diverse societal contexts. Such re-contextualisations enable the establishment of continuity with the past while simultaneously engaging with contemporary identity discourses. The particular strength of visual representations lies in their dual function as both immaterial and material *lieux de mémoire*, rooted in their physical materiality. Their physical limitations necessitate deliberate selection and significant narrative condensation; consequently, the founding narrative is not only visually "translated," but also transformed into a coherent and meaningful visual configuration. As material *lieux de mémoire*, these images do not merely convey meanings – they render immaterial discourse visible and tangible. By translating abstract concepts into concrete visual forms,

they facilitate emotional engagement with collective identity narratives, transforming an origin story into a narrative that actively shapes collective identity. Based on the findings of the two subsidiary research questions, the analyzed images emerge as performing a dual role: they function both as products of discourse and as producers of discourse.

However, the incorporation of a founding myth into collective memory through visual representation is contingent upon its perceived authenticity and cultural validation or legitimacy – factors that constitute essential preconditions for a narrative of shared origins to operate meaningfully within societal discourse. The visual representations examined contribute to this process not merely by depicting a collectively shared “historical past” at the intra-pictorial level, but also through their participation in broader discursive frameworks. Their efficacy is realized when the narratives they convey are culturally recognized as “true” and are embedded within what Foucault describes as a “regime of truth” – that is, within the cultural and historical structures that determine which representations are accepted as legitimate knowledge.

Accordingly, a comprehensive understanding of the emergence of these visual representations as influential mediators of the Gallic founding myth necessitates an analytical perspective that extends beyond the isolated examination of their internal compositional features and techniques. While individual images may generate a sense of authenticity and emotional resonance at the intra-pictorial level – thereby providing initial points of reference for collective identification – they only acquire discursive efficacy once the narrative they convey is culturally legitimized as “true.” This efficacy unfolds through recurring visual-strategic patterns which, as the analysis indicates, consistently manifest across of Cluster 1. Through their iterative reproduction, these patterns facilitate a transition from intra- to inter-pictorial coherence, producing a cumulative impression of narrative consistency and historical veracity. What is repeatedly visualized as a shared past thereby appears not only as historically accurate, but as inevitable. Thus, these images not only mirror the socio-political realities and discursive notions of “truth” characteristic of the nineteenth century, but also play an active role in shaping and legitimizing those very understandings through their ongoing visual (re)production. Owing to their circularity, material presence, and discursive role, the analyzed visual representations of the founding myth function as visual-media agents within a regime of

truth. Through the repeated reproduction of the visually constructed narrative of a shared past, they serve as powerful instruments for the formation of national identity.

7 Source Criticism, Research Ethics and Limitations

A defining feature of Foucauldian discourse analysis is its methodological openness. In the absence of a standardized procedure, each analysis must independently develop and justify its methodological framework. While this openness affords considerable flexibility, it also necessitates a high degree of methodological transparency.

A central methodological challenge of discourse analysis lies in its reflexive nature. While Foucault pays little attention to the self-reflexivity of his analyses, Phillips and Hardy (in Rose 2016, chap. 8.2) emphasize the importance of the assumptions, presuppositions, and linguistic structures of the environment in which the researcher is situated. Based on the assumption that discourses construct reality and that discourse analysis itself is part of this reality, the question arises as to how an objective analysis outside of these structures is possible, which presents a considerable limitation of this work. Therefore, the potential reproduction of existing discourses cannot be excluded. Furthermore, the precise interpretative analysis – even when substantiated – remains subject to the sociopolitical conditioning of the researcher, which raises questions of the limits of its generalizability.

A further limitation arises from intertextuality: since the impact of these representations cannot be examined in isolation from the prior establishment of the narrative they reference, their meaning depends on pre-existing knowledge structures, which are shaped by varying degrees of narrative familiarity. This interdependence complicates the assessment of the media's effect as a discrete or universally accessible phenomenon. Since it is not possible to capture the complete corpus of visual representations, as the research is limited in terms of available (temporal) resources and is largely based on a digital approach, important works that are not digitally documented might be overlooked. Further, the scope of this work does not allow for a thorough examination of all the works recorded in the corpus, which limits their representativeness. Referring to the reflexive nature of the methodology, it should also be noted that the selection of works – while following an analytical approach – might be subjectively influenced by the researcher.

Moreover, the chosen theoretical lens introduces its own boundaries. National identity is a complex, multilayered construct influenced by a wide array of cultural, political, and historical factors. The founding myth, while significant, represents only one component within the broader process of national identity formation. Accordingly, this thesis adopts a deliberately selective focus, recognizing that it can illuminate only a specific aspect of the complex dynamics at play. Moreover, the influence of visual representations on the construction of national identity is shaped not only by their visual strategies, but also – crucially – by audience reception (“site of audience”) as well as their modes of dissemination and accessibility (“site of circulation”). Owing to limitations in scope and insufficient available data, these factors could not be examined in the present research.

An aspect that both limits the thesis and presents a point of departure for future research is the ambivalent impact of visual representations of the founding myth. While such narratives play a central role in the formation of collective identity, they simultaneously exert an exclusionary effect—particularly in light of France’s colonial past and contemporary migration movements—by marginalizing cultural and ethnic diversity. The notion of a shared French history as the foundation of national identity systematically excludes those situated outside nationally defined boundaries (Citron 2016). This necessitates a critical relativisation of the full inclusivity of the myth. Consequently, this also represents a limitation in terms of the generalizability of the findings. Although this work, due to its limited scope, cannot fully address this aspect, the examination of the excluding dimension of the myth provides an important point of continuation and extension for future.

8 Conclusion

How can an image of surrender become the embodiment of a nation’s origin?

As this thesis has demonstrated, visual representations of the Gallic founding myth in the nineteenth century are not merely illustrations of historical events. Rather, by transforming military defeat into a moral victory, they succeed in effectively anchoring the founding narrative within the French collective memory. This not only illustrates the powerful impact of national founding myths, but also underscores the role of visual representations within identity-forming discourse.

This thesis thereby offers insight into the ways in which visual representations, as media agents in the nineteenth century, contributed to embedding the Gallic founding narrative in the collective memory of the French nation. In exploring the intricate relationship between visual depictions of national origin myths, collective memory, and the imagined community, the focus lies on a single medium as well as a specific thematic and temporal scope. These findings serve to complement existing interdisciplinary research on the Gallic founding myth by foregrounding the significance of modes of media transmission and the resulting discursive dynamics.

The distinctive effectiveness of these images lies primarily in their narrative condensation, which greatly reduces historical complexity and establishes coherent symbolic frameworks of meaning. However, it is precisely in this process of selection and reduction that the limitations of the visual medium become apparent: their impact depends on intertextual prior knowledge. Additionally, their broad interpretive openness results in considerable subjectivity in both audience reception and the present analysis. The efficacy of visual representations in the construction of national identity is determined not solely by their visual and compositional strategies, but also, to a considerable extent, by how they are received by audiences (“site of audience”) and by their circulation and accessibility (“site of circulation”).

These insights suggest directions for future inquiries and complementary research, such as investigating how visual representations of the Gallic founding myth not only operate as integrative elements, but simultaneously create mechanisms of exclusion, particularly in the context of French colonial history. The effects of changing socio-political contexts—such as the founding of the EU and European integration—on the interpretation and function of the myth also warrant closer examination. Finally, digital forms of reproduction and distribution, especially on social media, come into focus as central factors contributing to the visual distribution, reinterpretation, and dissemination of the myth in the digital age.

Further analysis of additional media clusters identified in the preliminary investigation could yield valuable insights. This raises the question of whether an increasing formal simplification of visual representations – towards more abstract or symbolic forms – reflects a progressive consolidation within the collective memory, and whether, during

the early phase of French nation-building, more elaborate visual-narrative depictions or paintings predominated. Examining images that depict Vercingétorix alongside other national symbolic figures such as Joan of Arc or Napoleon, thereby integrating the Gallic founding myth into broader national identity narratives, could demonstrate how the myth continually adapts to new national narratives and evolving societal needs.

Visual representations of a shared national past do not function solely within their original historical context. Although they remain unchanged and static as material objects, they exert a dynamic influence: the ways in which they are interpreted and embedded within social discourses continually adapt to new political and social contexts. As *lieux de mémoire*, they render the abstract concept of national identity experientially accessible in its immaterial form and perceptible in its material manifestation.

Not least, the persistent presence of the Gallic myth in political, cultural, and digital contexts underscores its ongoing significance as an identity-forming reference within France's collective memory. Its repeated mobilization across diverse media formats demonstrates its dynamic and adaptable role in public discourse. From politicians like Nicolas Sarkozy, who employed its rhetoric ("Our ancestors are the Gauls!", 2011), to the Asterix comics, the commercial use by brands such as *Gauloises*, and its continuous reinterpretation on social media, the myth remains a living and evolving element of collective identity.

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Appendix

no.	title	artist	year of production	technique	location	source
1	Vercingétorix se rendant à César	Motte, Henri Paul	1886	Oil on canvas	Le Puy-en-Velay; musée Crozatier	https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/01160005724?mainSearch=%22vercingetorix%22&last_view=%22list%22&idQuery=%224c112cf-c662-c4f-d7cf-3bbdea1478%22
2	Vercingétorix devant César; Vercingétorix jette ses armes aux pieds de César	Lionel Royer	1899	Oil on canvas	Le Puy-en-Velay; musée Crozatier	https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/01160003005?mainSearch=%22vercingetorix%22&last_view=%22list%22&idQuery=%224c112cf-c662-c4f-d7cf-3bbdea1478%22
3	Vercingetorix Throws Down His Arms At The Feet Of Julius Caesar	Emilie Lévy	1863	Oil on panel	private collection	https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2020/tableaux-dessins-sculptures-1300-1900-2/emile-levy-vercingetorix-throws-down-his-arms-at
4	Vercingétorix se rendant à César	Eliot Maurice	1885	Oil on canvas	Paris, école nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA)	https://histoire-image.org/etudes/alesia

5	Vercingétorix devant Jules César	Lantz, first name unknown (designer of the decoration and the model), Faïenceries de Creil & Montereau	1884-1920	Fine faïence; transparent glaze; printed and painted decoration; plate	Creil; musée Gallé-Juillet	https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/M0805000184?mainSearch=%22vercingetorix%22&last_view=%22list%22&idQuery=%224c112cf-c662-c4f-d7cf-3bbdea1478%22
6	Vercingétorix se rendant à César	Anonyme	19th century	Graphite with white highlights	Paris; musée du Louvre département des Arts graphiques	https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/50350227834?mainSearch=%22vercingetorix%20se%20rendant%22&last_view=%22list%22&idQuery=%220453ce8-e85-6ff8-4cb-c0f820556677%22
7	Chef gaulois (Vercingétorix) déposant les armes devant un romain (César)	Gaston Bussière	4th quarter of 19th century; 1st quarter of 20th century	Feather on paper	Mâcon; musée des ursulines	https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/01720003674?mainSearch=%22Les%20Gaulois%22&last_view=%22list%22&idQuery=%2273b4d0-f710-687f-d428-8beb443c00%22

Tab. Visual Representations of Cluster 1