The Suicidal Galatians and Christ Crucified as messianic iconoclasm: Textualizing images and re-imagining texts typologically

The death of Christ, as is well known, has firmly established typological counterparts in the First Testament – the Akedah, the (almost) sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham or the (not yet) end of Jonah in the belly of the Whale, most notably. At the same time and in a more general sense, biblical “types” and “antitypes” are widely used to infuse historical events outside and long after the Bible with meaning, for example when the whole unfolding history of North America was seen as typologically prefigured in the Bible. There is, however, a third kind of typology\(^1\) that is much less explored and presently emerging as an area where multiple innovative lines of study in New Testament scholarship seem to converge: namely the correlation between an ancient iconographic “type” and a New Testament textual “antitype”. Paul Zanker’s book on the *Power of the Images in the Age of Augustus*, though written by an archeologist and art historian without any theological inclinations, was nonetheless groundbreaking for the study of the New Testament as it demonstrated the importance of Greco-Roman visual sign-systems contemporary to early Christianity.\(^2\) Subsequently, scholars like David Balch, Harry O. Maier, Annette Weissenrieder and others rightly pointed out that visual representations were a hard-to-ignore

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\(^1\) I use the term “typology” tentatively here and in a very general sense as I will not be able to explore its appropriateness for the methodological approach I am proposing in a more in-depth manner.

\(^2\) Zanker 1990
part of the domestic and public environment that shaped the talking, thinking and writing about Jesus of Nazareth in the first and early second centuries C.E.—and that is therefore relevant for theological meaning-making. From another vantage point within Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation (SRI), Vernon Robbins has drawn attention to the importance of visuality as a vital element of rhetorical persuasion that doesn’t solely build on the widely explored mode of verbal argumentation (rhetology) but includes the long over-looked element of images and imagination (rhetography). “Once interpretation begins to focus on bodies and geophysical locations, it becomes obvious that it is necessary not only to interpret reasoning in argumentation but also to interpret picturing of people and the environments in which they are interacting. This means that interpreters must work not only with rhetology (the logic of rhetorical reasoning) but rhetography (the graphic picturing in rhetorical description).”

The typological exploration I am undertaking here is broadly based on this interaction of rhetology and rhetography as verbal/textual “reasoning in argumentation” on the one hand and “picturing of people and the environments” where this reasoning/picturing is situated. David Balch was the first to establish a fascinating connection between the “painting” (proegrafē) of Christ crucified before the Galatians’ eyes that Paul evokes in Gal 3:1, and the famous sculptures of the Dying Galatians that he sees as part of a whole iconographic cluster (or “type”) of Greco-Roman domestic art emphasizing tragedy and pathos—like Iphigenia or Laocoon. Images like this would be typically painted on the walls of Greco—Roman houses and Christians who lived and worshiped in these same houses would have seen them. This leads Balch to the

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3 Balch 2003; Maier 2005; Weissenrieder 2005.  
4 Robbins 2009:16.  
5 Balch 2003; Balch doesn’t use typological terminology, however.
question: “What would Paul’s word picture of Christ crucified have looked like, and would some Greco-Roman domestic paintings and sculptures have helped make his gospel comprehensible?”

In this paper, I would like to investigate the twin-image of the Dying Galatian, the so-called Suicidal Galatians in this same quasi-typological correlation or “inter-textuality” with the image of “Christ crucified.”

I will proceed in three steps: the first and by far most extensive section will explore modes of “visual exegesis”. In several ways we are moving at the intersection of text and image, rhetology and rhetography here. The Suicidal Galatians is a marble image sans paroles. If it “talks” without words, is there nonetheless an underlying “text” in terms of a script or narration that we can analyze? Of course we are well versed in the exegesis of texts, but can an image be exegeted like a text as well - and if so, how? I will try to employ elements of the socio-rhetorical approach (SRI) as outlined by Vernon Robbins7, with some semiotic and other modifications, in order to examine whether the Suicidal Galatian is readable with roughly the same methodology as a New Testament text.

Unlike the Suicidal Galatian, “Christ crucified” in Gal 3:1 is not an image made of marble or metal but a text made of words alone. Nonetheless it is talking not just verbally but through the strong imaginary “surplus” of the “word-images” it evokes. It appears as a model case of rhetography, especially as Paul explicitly mentions the term proegraphein that can have both the meaning of public proclamation and “proclaim by providing a vivid portrait,” which are both present in this case8: You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes

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6 Ibid., 88
7 Robbins 1996.
8 Martyn 1997: 283. “Like other ancient storytellers, Paul was able to speak ‘so vividly and so impressively that his hearers imagined the matter to have happened right before their eyes.’” (ibid., 283, quoting Betz 1979:131)
that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited (proegraphē) as crucified! (NRSV) The strongly visual (rhetographic) dimension of this statement can just be observed by looking at various translations of proegraphē that range from “portrayed” (ESV), “publicly portrayed” (RSV, NAB), “clearly portrayed” (NIB), to “you have had a clear picture” (NIB), “vor Augen gemalt (painted before your eyes)” (EIN, LUT)), up to “as though I had shown you a signboard with a picture of Christ dying on the cross” (NLT). Based on this strongly “pictorial” dimension of Gal 3:1, I will in a second step, condensed in a much shorter postscript, look at some points of comparison. How does the meaning of the a-textual image of the Suicidal Galatians (as established through visual exegesis) relate to the meaning of the imageless text-image of Christ Crucified? How do “type” and “antitype” talk to one another, and what might this dialogue—or rather clash—of the two images yield for the theological hermeneutics of cross and resurrection? In a third step and another short postscript, this critical re-imagination as a semiotics of visual transformation will finally be concluded by a few observations on how our established reading much more imitates the pagan “type” of Christ crucified than its Pauline “antitype”.9

I. “Reading” the Suicidal Galatians – an exercise in socio-rhetorical visual exegesis

1. Basic introductory questions

The traditional title of the sculpture has been the Suicidal Gaul or the Ludovisi Suicidal Gaul. According to the common legend it shows a defeated tribal Galatian chieftain of Asia Minor who has (most likely) killed his wife and is now plunging the sword into his own clavicular cavity in order to avoid capture and worse. The ancient languages do not make a

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9 For the approach of “Critical Re-Imagination” that emerged from my own work with reading Paul’s letter to the Galatians and the Great Altar of Pergamon (alongside other pieces of Roman imperial art) “synoptically”, see Kahl 2010: 27-29. 250-53.
difference between “Gauls” and “Galatians”. Both of them denote the large ethnic group of Celtic tribes that migrated over all of Europe and as far east as present-day Turkey between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE.\(^{10}\) In line with our current English use of “Galatians” for the Celts of Asia Minor (and of Paul), the more adequate title should be the *Suicidal Galatian*. As this however entirely eclipses the female half of the sculpture, today different titles are used like *The Suicidal Galatians* or *The Galatian Suicide*.

The *Suicidal Galatians* is one of two sculptures of “large” Gauls (about 7 feet tall), the other being the *Dying Gaul/Galatian* or *Dying Trumpeter*.\(^{11}\) Both date back to about 230 BCE when Pergamon won a decisive victory over the Galatians, namely marauding, plundering and

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., 48-51.

blackmailing barbarian tribes that had terrorized the region for several decades—if the standard depiction by Greco-Roman historiographers is to be trusted.\textsuperscript{12} As part of a huge Celtic migration wave, the Galatians of three different tribal groups had crossed over to Anatolia around 278 BCE, shortly after their fellow tribes had tried to sack the world-famous temple of Apollo at Delphi, the navel of the world, in 279 BCE—an act seen as utmost sacrilege and lawlessness. In constant clashes with the indigenous populations, the Galatians of Asia Minor are reported to have devastated cities, raped women, forced money out of citizens and rulers until finally Attalus I of Pergamon struck them down—and promptly announced his achievement as “salvation” by taking the titles of \textit{king} and \textit{soter}.\textsuperscript{13}

The original placement of both sculptures of the \textit{Dying} and \textit{Suicidal Galatians} was probably on the grounds of the Temple of Athena at the Pergamene acropolis. Immediately neighboring then would have been the Great Altar of Pergamon, erected some 60 years later and celebrating the triumph of civilization over the Galatian barbarians on a much larger scale after a last and lasting Galatian victory of the Attalids around 170 BCE. Here, in the gigantomachy frieze of the Great Altar, the Galatians appear under the mythological disguise of rebellious giants defeated by a divine coalition under the leadership of Zeus, Athena and the other Olympic gods.\textsuperscript{14}

Attalus I also commissioned other smaller figures of \textit{Dying Gauls/Galatians}, together with dying giants, Amazons, and Persians, and sent them to Athens. Altogether, 10 different sculptures of this group that constitutes the “Lesser Attalid dedication” have survived; in Athens they were


\textsuperscript{14} Stewart 2000; Kahl 2010: 77-127.
placed on the outside wall of the Parthenon, featuring the signature battles of Greek civilization against giants, Amazons, Persians, and Galatians/Gauls. These sculptures, smaller in size, are the so-called Small Gauls/Galatians.\footnote{For an in-depth exploration see Stewart 2004.}

Unfortunately, just like in New Testament scholarship, we don’t have the originals of the object we study here—the first “manuscript” (or “manufact”) of our sculpture was in bronze and is long gone; what we look at today is a Roman marble copy that was made at the end of the first or beginning of second century C.E. It is not exactly clear how the sculpture made its way to Rome and where it was placed. Maybe Nero took the originals with him from Asia minor when he looted—with his own official permission—famous artwork from the Greek East and placed it into his Golden House, one of the greatest state sponsored art robberies in history.\footnote{Pliny, Nat 34.84; Dio Chrysostom, Orationes 31.148; Pausanias 10.7.1; cf. Balch 2003; Kahl 2010:295} The sculptures got lost at some point and were only rediscovered on the grounds of the villa Ludovisi in Rome around 1620, in an area that had been the gardens of Sallust in ancient times. These Roman copies subsequently became wildly popular among European rulers (Louis XIV claimed one when he had defeated Italy and placed it in Versailles); they are today on display in the Musei Nazionale in Rome, while many of the “small” Gauls/Galatians are to be seen in museums all over Europe.\footnote{Haskell and Penny 224-27,282-84.}

To conclude this first cursory look at the Suicidal Galatians: Arguably, they are part of a coherent visual program that shows the combat of civilization and nomos against “giant” forces of barbarism, lawlessness and chaos. Together with the three other images or cluster of images that all originate from Pergamon—The Dying Gaul/Galatian, the Small Gauls/Galatian (with their Giant, Persian and Amazon accomplices) and the Gigantomachy Frieze at the Great Altar.
of Pergamon—they constitute a “type” (or even “archetype”) of the Western imaginary that was already firmly established at the time when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. It is noteworthy that the recipients of Paul’s letter are the direct descendants of these dying, dead and suicidal Galatians: the flesh-and blood “antitypes” of the marble (or bronze) “types”, as it were. This is why they matter for New Testament interpretation—and still today. The big special exhibition at the Berlin Pergamon Museum around the Pergamon-Panorama of Yadegar Assissi in 2011-12 staged that “type” as visual program in a highly dramatic way, with the Suicidal Galatians as a visual climax. Not accidentally Haskell and Penny talk about these sculptures as a core part of the musée imaginaire of the Christian West.\textsuperscript{18} The whole space evoked the aura of a temple or cathedral, transposing the spectator into the innermost sanctuary of occidental constructs of religion and of power that reach far back into the mythological past established by Greeks and Romans but are still very much part of our present. We will return to this.

2. Exegesis: Inner texture

a) Overall structure: Spatial arrangement

Every textual exegesis starts with a first reading – from left to right and from top to bottom of a page\textsuperscript{19}—that also includes an initial ‘scanning’ of the text for its most eye-catching features and basic structure. If we apply this to the “reading” of the Suicidal Galatians, choosing a frontal view of the sculpture to begin with, some interesting observations are to be made. There are two bodies, male and female, that constitute the image, one upright, dynamic and in a forward move, the other sunk down towards the ground and static. The connecting link is his left arm reaching out towards her in a gentle gesture of support that upholds her by her right upper arm and

\textsuperscript{18} Haskell and Penny 1981: 225

\textsuperscript{19} Robbins....
extends into her left arm that is stretched out in a circular, very delicate movement as if she was dancing in a trance. In terms of the spatial arrangement, this horizontal movement of support is crossed out by an intense and violent verticality. His right hand and the sword it holds come from above his head, moving straight down in a very tangible force line of destruction that nails him to the ground like a flash of lightning. His collapse is imminent. This downwards movement is mirrored and pre-viewed in the right hand of the woman that already is about to touch the ground with the very tip of its index finger, while both her knees are already down. This creates a diagonal from the left and top of the “page” to its right bottom. The “textual dynamics” is clearly from high to low, up to down, from his sword hand above on the left to her hand and knees on the ground below and at the right.

If we follow the progression of the “text” from left to right and top to bottom, the message is quite compelling: The void to the right of his head and upper body signals her prior disappearance from this spatial level of “high”, anticipating his disappearance and fall as well; at the end of the sequence both will be at the very bottom.

b) Vocabulary: Matters of translation and “word study”

Another indispensable start of textual exegesis is the translation from the original language and a closer study of relevant words. An image like the Suicidal Galatians obviously has no Greek letters that need to be deciphered; it is not made of words that have to be translated into English one by one and studied in their multiple meanings. Nonetheless, as for example Tonio Hölscher in his landmark study about the “language of the images” has shown, there is an underlying semiotics.²⁰ There are visuals signs and markers that carry meaning, unfamiliar vocabulary of a

²⁰ Hölscher 2004.
foreign language we have to learn. And like in our general work with foreign languages there are also “false friends” we need to be aware of—words or visual impulses that seem immediately comprehensible to us but, in fact, carry a quite different meaning than we think they have. So there is a double approach: On the one hand, in the study of images, everything depends on our capacity to see, to look closely and precisely. On the other hand we cannot take the meaning of our observations and responses for granted, for there is a foreign cultural context with aesthetic signs and significations different from ours that needs to be respected in its alterity. It is only through the foreignness of their language that we can start to become familiar with what these images actually are communicating. As part of this translation work we will look at a few important elements of the visual vocabulary of our sculpture:

Visual marker 1—“his” manliness

At first sight and from a present-day perspective the Galatian man is very beautiful and has a strong, perfectly built body with impressive muscles, as well as a vigorous and youthful stride. It takes some help from art historians to understand that this might not have been the impression of ancient spectators. As Andrew Stewart has pointed out, the male body in Greek iconography mirrors the image of the well-established polis. Muscles, for example, are expected to be well developed in order to show hard work and self-mastery, but they must not be too prominent. Skin can be neither too thick nor too thin, to show rather than obscure the rational construction of the body in the right way. Compared to these ratios and rules, the image of the Suicidal Galatians is plainly a most appalling image of excess, of lacking measure. The muscles, for example, are

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21 For a comprehensive exploration of the official sign-systems of Galatian/Gallic semiotics in Greco-Roman art see Marszal 2000.
over-developed and “pop out like tumors all over its surface”. This is linked to the topic of lacking balance as a stock argument of anti-barbarian rhetoric: Ἀστερεία as restraint, moderation, and right measure is the focal characteristic of civilization and the reason for its superiority over and against the barbarians. “They” have either too much or too little of everything. While the Greeks show true manliness, the barbarians are either effeminate cowards or brainlessly over-heroic; instead of true wisdom they oscillate between stupidity and too much smartness. And as their long history of bloody clashes with the Greco-Roman world shows, they are also lacking proper justice, law and religion; unlike true human beings they are lawless and godless, almost like beasts. In other words, despite the traits of beauty and the drama behind his story, our Galatian chieftain is not to be seen as an attractive man nor a human being for whom we have compassion, but rather an irrational warrior belonging to an inferior part of humanity who is closer to ferocious wild animals than true human beings.

Visual marker #2—“her” beauty and hairstyle

Again at first sight one is inclined to see the woman to the left of the Galatian as a lovely human being, just a pretty young woman. And again we have to look twice if we want to decode the original language of the image and see what the ancients might have seen. What about her facial and bodily features? Is her face maybe too broad? And what does the dress signal as it slides over her right shoulder, what about the conspicuous features of her right breast being exposed as if she was available: for whom? And then: her hair! I wouldn’t have known to call it “shaggy” if the ancient historiographers like Diodorus and Livy hadn’t informed me what the right

22 Stewart 1997:220.
24 On the famous description of the Galatians in Diodorus 5.3 as lawless barbarians see Kahl 2010:42-46.
25 On disheveled clothing as marker of defeated barbarian women and the ethnic groups they represent, see Maier 2005:396; also Canavan 2012:123-132.
language is to be used. The Galatians have horse-like manes like Pans and Satyrs, Diodorus informs us. They wash their hair in lime-water, an ancient barbarian prototype of today’s styling gel used to make it hoarse and stiff. And talking about her hair, we can see the same feature in him as well—both of them have hair that stands off in strong tufts that signal lack of civilization and full humanity.26

Staying with the hair: all throughout antiquity it seems to have been (and still is today) a very sensitive aesthetic marker; depending on its “fashion” it can indicate uncivilized and near-beastly or superior, god-like qualities. It can also signal the split of nature (bushy and wild hair) versus culture (well-groomed hair or no hair). It should be noted, as Stewart points out, that the male Galatian has far too bushy eyebrows to be civilized and that his mustache is not right either. His face would need to be either clean-shaven or sport a full set of facial hair—again we encounter the issue of having too little or too much.27 We see the same in the Dying Galatian, while the Dead Giant from the group of the small barbarians even features armpit hair and a lion’s skin to protect his arm. Armpit-hair is also used in the Gigantomachy Frieze of the Pergamon Altar to indicate the barbarian and beastly nature of the Giants/Galatians—together with snake legs, birds’ claws and even a lion’s head that all mark them as mixed creatures below fully human. They represent, in one word, the terrifying, threatening power of anti-civilization and nature as such.28

26 Diodorus 5.28; cf. Kahl 2010:45.  
27 Stewart 2004  
28 Kahl 2010
Decoding the sculpture in this manner, we can experience how our perception shifts. His facial expression is another example. We start to see how he doesn’t just communicate strong emotion, passion together with panic (all perfectly understandably in his situation, we had initially thought), but we learn that his rawness and wildness constitute a lack of self-control that is completely “out of order”. Compared to the rationality and moderation of Greek civilization, his emotion is terrifying, irrational, destructive and thus repulsive. He is an enemy, an agent of terror.²⁹

Apart from the small cloak floating from his back, the male Galatian is completely naked. His nudity makes the wound he has inflicted on himself fully visible, with the blood gushing out of it in large drops. In the impulsiveness of the thrust he has obviously caught a little bit of the cloak as well, which is pushed into the wound in a somewhat macabre parody. Wounds, according to Stewart, are never rendered in classical Greek battle scenes. At least as far as the Greeks are concerned. Here, in the depiction of the Celtic chieftain, the wound is even rendered in relief.³⁰ Livy points out that the very white body of the Celts (whiteness at this stage equals barbarian-ness and inferiority) is exposed in battle by full nudity, in other words: the Galatian barbarians indeed used to fight naked. Thus the blood is even more visible, marking a stark contrast against the white skin. Stewart assumes that in the original bronze bronzes the blood must have been inlaid in copper, and that the body itself was also whitewashed, making them look more like the

²⁹ Edith Hall, Constructing the Barbarian...
³⁰ Stewart 1997:220
present marble sculptures. Their torques (which constitute a classic visual marker of Celts) and hair would have been gilded, with lips and eyes inlaid.  

Obviously the rules of perception for nudity are not the same for Greeks and barbarians. Nudity is of course a well known feature in Greek art for gods and men—but this might be a nightmarish example of Greek artistic convention turned around and mocked, being embodied now in the person of the “barbarian berserker”, as Stewart states: “Inverting the classical Greek heroic nude, these statues turned it into a corpse-like specter, a death demon from hell.” The fate of these barbarians is pre-ordained. Their explosive vitality and masculinity is a monstrosity that can only drive them into extinction. Although there might be an element of empathy, the Pergamenes “would not have considered these alien bodies as beautiful and would certainly have objectified and savored the violence done to them.”

To conclude our first rather sketchy “word study” of the visual vocabulary and its translations: The key elements (or “words”) in our sculpture of the Suicidal Galatians all belong to the semantic field of barbarian foreignness that denotes aspects of the alien, subhuman, not-us. They convey a lack of right measure, rationality, manliness, righteousness, religion. Rather than beauty they signal ugliness and repulsiveness and are meant to distance the viewer from the drama and trauma of the Galatians, rather than establishing a bond of shared humanity and compassion. “These statues appease the gaze with a vision of moral virtue and justice (dike in the sense of both Right and Order) triumphant over absolute evil and absolute chaos…”

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31 Ibid.
32 Robin M. Jensen, Nudity in Early Christian Art...
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
c. Narrative texture (Beginning-Middle-End)

Exploring the “narrative texture” in a textual exegesis requires us to look at core features of the “plot”, including its movement from the beginning over the middle to an end-point. The three-dimensionality of our sculpture that is not restricted to the frontal view alone, allows us to identify these three points in its overall architecture as left-front-right as well. We will again start “reading” it from the left, then move back to the frontal view and end to the right.\(^\text{36}\)

“Beginning”—View from left

If we approach the statue from the left, we see a powerful male warrior in combat pose with his sword risen and in a forward-stride, his stola floating behind him as he is moving ahead; his gaze turned upwards, he at first sight seems unstoppable; the contours of the slumped body against his leg on the other side could be a fallen enemy or a woman he raped—the incontestable right of the victorious warrior. He is triumphant, he is moving on … What we are decoding here is the visual rhetoric of victory and conquest.

\(^{36}\) For the conveying of different messages by the statue, depending on the direction from which it is looked at, see also Balch 2003: 100, drawing on Schalles 1996:413.
“Middle”—View from front

The frontal view of the statue reveals a complete and dramatic deconstruction and reversal of what we thought we saw so far—in classic Aristotelian narrative theory the *peripety*, the sudden “turn” of the entire plot. Our prior image falls apart as we see the gushing wound underneath his throat and the sword that is turned against himself, about to penetrate his heart. The movement is down, no longer onward and upward. He is stopped in his tracks. We also can watch the absurd contradiction of him looking behind now (rather than up towards heaven), while his legs pretend to move forward. We realize that he is terrified, he probably sees his victor approaching from behind. All of a sudden it occurs to us that he, in fact, is trying to run away! Yet he can’t run because his sword and the woman he has killed (in a strike of mercy? Or who has been killed?) is nailing them both to the ground. This is ridicule and mockery of all non-Greek/non-Roman
resistant heroism: the total collapse of the male victorious warrior if he happens to be a barbarian.

“End”—view from the far right

This finally leads to the ultimate DOWN, the bottom of the page, ground level and ground zero of barbarian warfare: She will go down as he can no longer hold her, falling flat onto the ground with her belly first. He will follow her. Their hands are already parting. Their fall cannot be stopped, and this is the end of their story. It is noteworthy that this same sequence and inevitable outcome of fighting-falling-fallen is also mirrored in the figures of the other “small” and “big” dying barbarians, as well as in countless representations of fighting and falling Gauls/Galatians in Greco-Roman art: e.g. the fallen Giant with his sword still in his hand over his head, or the
Dying Galatian who is slumped over his sword that he will never take up again. Most notably it shapes the whole “script” of the giant-battle frieze at the Great Altar or Pergamon. Nowhere else, however, are the Galatian shown to commit suicide, although this was a well-known habit of their leaders and warriors in the case of defeat.

To conclude: If we combine our analysis of plot and inner texture so far with a brief observation on “genre” we might say that we are dealing with a tragedy interspersed with elements of comedy. There might even be a certain empathy on the side of the viewer, but there is also a sadistic fascination with wounds, pain and death, both his and hers. According to ancient perception rules this is well deserved pain and death and therefore needs to give the spectator

37 For an impressive collection of such images of Dying and Dead Galatians/Gauls see Bienkowski 1908 and 1928.
38 E.g. Brennus after the unsuccessful attack at Delphi in 279 BCE; also Vindex in 68 C.E.
39 Her wound is obviously underneath her right armpit from where blood is trickling down her arm in big drops.
— in the same way as the public “life shows” of thousand-fold dying and death in the Roman arenas were to be seen as satisfying and pleasurable entertainment. What we are looking at here with an intrusive gaze is a very private drama of husband and wife in the moment of their defeat—yet a drama that is foundational for the whole construct of our culture and civilization.

III) What does it mean?—Intertexture

1. Historical background

Not accidentally the only extant versions of the Suicidal and Dying Galatians are Roman copies. The Pergamene bronze originals are lost in the dust of history, while the Roman marble survived many centuries of being buried in the ground until its resurrection in 1623 and subsequent triumph that led it to Versailles and Louis XIV as well as to Prince Metternich in Vienna and Alexander von Humboldt in Berlin in the aftermath of the Vienna congress that re-drew the map of Europe in 1814-15. The sculpture is the embodiment of several centuries of anti-barbarian and in particular anti-Galatian/Celtic warfare led by the forces of civilization, Greeks and Romans alike, but finally won by Rome. In the power vacuum after Alexander the Great, each major victory over these quintessential forces of anti-civilization and chaos was translated into a “salvation” of humankind and a claim to power. The ultimate victor on this plane, however, was Rome. Its empire, as is well known, rose out of Julius Caesar’s triumph over Gaul/Galatia in today’s France. Since 387 BCE, the never forgotten dark moment in Roman history when the Gauls/Galatians had sacked the city and almost conquered the capitol, Rome had been in perpetual war with these hideous foes that became the paradigmatic type of “the” barbarian. In

41 On Roman arenas as a “life” replica of the marble statues of Dying and Dead Barbarians, see Kahl 2010:159-160
189 BCE a brutal massacre in Asia Minor by the Roman general Manlius Vulso (still aligned
with Pergamon) cost the lives of 40,000 Galatians. Over the next 200 years, when the Pergamene
kingdom had long become the Roman province of Asia (133 BCE), Rome successfully colonized
and “civilized” the Galatians by co-opting their elites until finally in 25 BCE Augustus himself,
two years after he had become princeps, established the Roman province of Galatia. This is the
same province into which some 75 years later Paul writes his arguably most famous letter to the
Galatians, the direct descendants of our *Suicidal Galatians.*  

2. Social/ideological/sacred texture

A historical background like this inevitably results in a heavy load of ideological and sacred
meaning connected to our sculpture. The whole genetic code, and the “success formula” of
Western civilization is inerasably inscribed into its marble flesh, the normative world view with
its all-pervasive binaries: civilization versus barbarians; God(s) versus godless; righteousness
versus lawlessness and unrighteousness; ratio and wisdom versus irrationality; *nomos* versus
chaos—the unbalanced mess of too much or too little, of irrationality, blasphemy, and
lawlessness that is embodied in the Galatians as paradigmatic barbarians; society versus non-
society; human versus subhuman/beastly; superior versus inferior. Finally and in all of this the
underlying antithesis of Us versus Them functions as the glue holding all of that together, “they”
being the aliens, the non-us, the Other, the threat to “us”. In the received wisdom, to quote
Stewart once more, “the Celts were mad, the ultimate Other. In ancient terms, they were both
devoid of *dike* and mortal foes: We would call them sociopaths.” Celtic society is demonized as
“a non-society, a militarized satyr kingdom in which all the norms of civilized human (i.e.
Greek) behavior have been overturned.”  

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43 For a historical summary see Kahl 2010.
44 Stewart 1997:220.
not only legally and culturally justified but also divinely sanctified war and conquest, colonial exploitation and subjugation, and if necessary extermination—in other words: the successful if bloody progress of the Christian Occident throughout the centuries and all over the globe until this day.

3. Message/”skopos”:

If this is the symbolic universe into which our image is embedded, then we need to add another element to its “plot”. In the story the sculpture tells, there is an untold end-point, a “skopos” at which the story-line is aiming like the archer who shoots his arrow. It is an image not present physically but produced mentally through the rhetography of the sculpture, its inherent power to prompt the brain into generating new images, fill in the blank spaces on the screen of the seen with vivid visualizations of the yet un-seen that is going to happen next. Among all the Dying/Dead barbarians that have survived from antiquity, not a single one is standing so tall and high as the Suicidal Galatia—no one who so vividly exhibits the martial prowess and flaws of his race, no one who is still standing at all. Yet if our male warrior is the only one of them standing, it is also clear that he stands in order to fall. And as he falls, the Greeks, Pergamenes and finally the Romans can move up and occupy this room at the top, the coveted space “above” at the peak of the power pyramid that is legitimately theirs and not his: If it looked for a fleeting moment that the Galatians, the Celts, the Gauls could be the victorious warriors, the embodiment of triumphant masculinity, the usurpers of civilization, this was just a mockery of their barbarian volatility. The Romans, not the Galatians, or any other barbarians, are the really victorious warriors, true men, true humans, and true heirs of Greek civilization.
4. *Semiotic analysis*

If we try to depict this inner texture of the image with its inbuilt antitheses that make it “move,” the model of the “semiotic square” from the traditional toolbox of structuralism might give some visual and analytic help. Semiotic squares structure a text in accordance with its intrinsic opposites of A and non-A, B and non-B that are arranged on diagonal axes of opposition that cross each other, creating the shape of a square with four corners. A and B are arranged on the upper side of that shape, signaling a position of superiority, a “High up and In” in the spatial and symbolic order that is often attributed to the Self and to the Divine. A and B in this are different, but aligned with one another, mutually supportive and complementary. (In the diagram below this complementary relationship is indicated through “equation lines” rather than adversarial arrows.) In a similar way, the oppositional positions of non-A and non-B at the bottom are both in complementary ways indicative of a spatial and symbolic location of “Low and Out” that is usually attributed to the Other and un-godly.45

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45 For a more in-depth explanation see Patte 1990:14-16. For my own slightly modified use of the semiotic square see Kahl 2010:15-21, 86-89.
The semiotic square, applied to our sculpture of the *Dying Galatian*, yields the following structure:

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46 The employment of semiotic squares for visual exegesis goes back to my earlier work on the semiotics of the Great Altar of Pergamon. This twin-image of the *Suicidal Galatians* represents the most formidable and monumental creation climax in the linage of the *Dying and Suicidal Galatians*, depicting the fight of civilization/Greeks/Romans/divine/law as cosmogonic triumph over Galatian barbarians/blasphemy/Chaos. For a first experimentation with imposing a semiotic square directly over an image (the Pergamon Altar) see Kahl 2005, 26—further developed in Kahl 2010. Davina Lopez (2008) has subsequently used this method for her work with the *ethne*-depictions at Aphrodisias, with a particular focus on gender.
Seen from the “beginning” position to the left, the Galatian appears as victorious warrior with his gaze slightly directed to the “above” that is linked to the superior entities of the divine, of Law, and of power—all of them ideally represented through the *numen* of victory. The oppositional sphere is the “below” that in the semiotic system of ancient images preferably would require a female to represent a defeated nation or tribe, as we e.g. know from Aphrodisias.\(^{47}\) This position that is held by the slumped figure of the kneeling and falling woman\(^{48}\) not only equals inferiority, powerlessness, slavery and (as the victorious claim the gods and the law to be on their side) also godlessness (or god-forsakeness) and lawlessness. If we read this view of the sculpture like the front page of a text from top left to bottom right, we get the full story from triumphant conquest to colonization or extermination of the conquered. From the perspective of the producers of this sculpture and the dominant point of view, there is, however, a serious problem with this

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\(^{48}\) On kneeling as the prototypical position of defeated barbarians see Schneider 1986, Canavan 2012: 123-4.
depiction. It is a profoundly wrong image. The victorious male warrior is a barbarian, as indicated by the clearly legible visual markers of his hair, bulging muscles and excessive emotion. This would mean that the defeated, de-masculinized figure at the bottom are the Pergamenes, Greeks, Romans. This is no image of noble victory, rather the nightmare of civilization trampled down and vandalized by the hordes of barbarianism. The effect of the image would be a shocked outcry and a dramatic back and forth between stunned exclamations and incredulous questions regarding this blasphemous reversal of roles, claims and positions.

However, as we shift our position from left to right, another “text” emerges. The Galatian is not at all a victorious warrior but a suicidal enemy combatant who realizes that his battle is irreversibly lost. His going down is his testimony as to who rightfully owns the position at the top of the power pyramid—and who doesn’t. The same force that draws him to the ground
induces a spinning movement that lifts his conquerors up from the bottom of non-A, non-high, and makes them enter into the position of A= top. Long after Pergamon’s power is gone, and the rest of the Diadoch kingdoms are history past, this is the divinely sanctioned demonstration that “now”, in the first century CE, Rome is destined to rule the world in an “empire without end.”

It is the Galatian warrior and with him his whole tribe and their descendants that will be lawfully Roman subjects, alongside a whole multitude of other conquered nations like the Jewish *ethnos*—right into the time of Paul and the New Testament.

This charade, the inversion between up and down, down and up with its reliably established outcome (seen from the perspective of the victorious) is the fascination, the horror and suspense, but also the comfort and confirmation embedded into this sculpture, there to be reaped by anybody who can “read” the image. As the death of the barbarians is self-inflicted (they deserve what they get), the order of conquest that enslaves and colonizes them is sanctioned and

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49 Virgil, *Aeneid*...
glorified, and so is the power of the conquerors who rule the world because they are the true warriors, legitimized and empowered by the deities, and thus the true victors.

This is the visual and ideological paradigm under which the dying and dead Galatians inscribed themselves into the history of the Christian West. In 1886 at the first European presentation of the Great Altar of Pergamon, freshly excavated and shipped from Turkey to Berlin, the German Kaiser staged a huge historical parade that showed him in the role of Attalus I as conqueror of the Galatians. The Attalids of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, after manifold clashes with the Galatians, had put them into the mythological garb of the ancient giants and monumentalized them in the gigantomachy Frieze of the Great Altar, thus attributing to themselves the role of the Olympic deities in the most prototypical of all archaic battles. For Wilhelm I it was his recent victory over France that he put into the historical garb of a victory over the Galatians. He dressed up 3000 people as Pergamenes or Galatian prisoners of war that were paraded through the streets of Berlin up to a temporary temple of Zeus that also contained a replica of the Great Altar. A herald proclaimed: “Barbarians have threatened empire and country; the king defeated them with a strong hand; now he is returning home, adorned with victory; his people are hailing him with delight.”

This made sense particularly because the French were the contemporary descendents of the ancients Gauls/Galatians/Celts. Yet even without this immediate connection, all throughout history the Dying and Dead Gauls were innumerable times brought back and revived as stand-ins for the enemy, the inferior, the exploitable and expendable Other of whoever wanted to present them-Selves in the pose of the victorious with God(s) and Law on their side. However, it is precisely this almost seamless continuity and whole-hearted hermeneutics of consent which has

shaped the reception history of the *Dying and Dead Galatians* that raises a few questions from a New Testament point of view.

**Postscript 1: Christ crucified as mock antitype of the Suicidal Galatian?**

At the landmark exhibition around Yadegar Assisi’s Pergamon Panorama in Berlin (2011-12) the *Suicidal Galatians* were placed at an elevated pedestal facing a long red table of other dying and dead Galatians and barbarians, including a *Dying Persian*, a *Dead Giant*, and a *Dead Amazon*, together with a plaster cast of the *Dying Trumpeter*. The majestic and gruesome presentation in a semi-dark room, with artifacts belonging to the Pergamene kings or queens and their deities “watching” from the fringes, evoked a sanctuary-like feeling of awe, god-willed sacrifice, immovable *nomos*—with the barbarians “down” and dead (except for the one still standing) and “us” in a place of perceived, spatially constructed supremacy and sustainability owed to the “with us” of divine order and law and power.
Among several somewhat unsettling aspects of this scene was the impression that at the altar-like spot, prominently marked by a halo-like golden mosaic background, where our Christian visual anticipation would expect an image of the crucified Christ, another imposing shape was placed that even featured some cruciform allusions: impalement on a vertical axis; horizontally extended arms; imminent death, for example. Indeed the two images undeniably have several common traits. Historically, both Christ Crucified and the Suicidal Galatian represent a non-Roman Other who needs to be disciplined and punished for non-compliance with the dominant order and law of a superior (Roman) civilization. We could even extend the comparison to images of noble and self-willed death.

Yet, if the two images at first sight appear as comparable, they at a closer look reveal a radically different plot and perspective. The “story-line” of the Suicidal Galatians, as willed by their
makers and sovereigns, ends with death and down on the “Red Table,” however tall the male still stands. Like the giants who wanted to conquer Mount Olympus, they dreamed to be UP there, but world power doesn’t belong to them, so they needed to be shown their place in the order of things: DOWN. They need to be rightly punished for their fight against law, the gods, reason, the world order. If there is life for them, henceforth it is as obedient subjects subservient to the law and the religion of the emperor who can use and abuse their bodies, who owns them, is entitled to exploit them. They are irreversibly scripted and conscripted as subjects, slaves and soldiers of the empire. Undeniably, within this framework there is some space for upward mobility, especially for the elite Galatians as the ones in our sculpture, for example as priests, priestesses, or benefactors in provincial and local imperial cults in Asia and Galatia—but only if the descendants of our Galatian chieftain will become fully subservient and allow themselves to be co-opted by Rome. They will owe their life exclusively to the grace of Augustus/Sebastos, the father and life-giver and supreme God of the fatherland.

The story-line of Christ Crucified is radically different. It doesn’t end in death but in life, not life granted by the emperor but life granted through God who contests the emperor’s self-declared rank as God and “son of God”. His resurrection is not by the emperor’s but by God’s grace, a God whose theology embodies a different logic than God Caesar’s; it reclaims the bodies of the conquered, the dying, and the dead from the system that holds them captive—the law of death. The first and signature theological statement of the letter to the Galatians (Gal 1:1) is the resurrection of Christ through God the father—and in light of the Dying and Suicidal Galatians this is a counter-imperial statement of much weight, resulting in a monumental clash of images. God is removed from the position at the top of the symbolic/semiotic universe—in line with the rulers and the dominant order—to a position at the bottom where the conquered and defeated are
located, right on the “Red table.” This is an iconoclasm of cosmic dimensions, an all comprising shattering of conventional images. It is as if the suicidal thrust was reverted, the Galatian couple and their barbarian sisters and brothers, sons and daughters were brought back to life—not in order to continue fighting against Greeks and Romans or Jews for the “throne” or crown of victory, but for sitting down together with people from all nations at the table. It is a table where no longer death is shared but the bread and wine of life. In this way the image of Christ Crucified, that Paul in Gal 3:1 so desperately tries to bring back before the eyes of the Galatians, not only mocks the logic and visual program of the Suicidal Galatians, it also aims at over-writing it in the minds and collective imagination of the Galatians who are still shaped in their Self-construct by its antithetical and combative logic of Self versus Other. For this is ultimately the logic of empire and therefore self-enslaving and self-destructive: “stupid, foolish, idiotic”, as Paul bluntly taunts the Galatians in Gal 3:1. The image of Christ crucified is meant to show a different way to see the world, the Other, and Oneself. In this way Paul’s theology of the cross, closely in tandem with his justification theology, is a radically subversive intervention into the order of things—and into the order of “seeing”.

Postscript II: Christ Crucified as “consensual” antitype of the Dying/Suicidal Galatians

The established order of perception, the “ordinary” way of seeing things “properly”, however, always made its way back—if it ever vanished. On a 15th century stained glass window from the church in Werben/Germany one can see a crucifixion scene that possibly belongs under the (rare) rubric of the so called Living or Avenging Crosses. Although the crucified Christ doesn’t wield a sword himself, a divine hand with a sword is coming straight down from heaven here. This is visually strongly reminiscent of the sword striking the Suicidal Galatian from above.

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51 Timmermann 2001
Only that in this case the weapon is plunged with deadly force into the head and body of a female synagogue figure underneath the left side of the cross. She is blindfolded, riding on a donkey or ass about to collapse, with a broken staff and a toppling crown, holding a male goat’s head in her hand. In stark contrast to this image of destruction and aggression, to the right side a heavenly hand is crowning another woman, obviously triumphant, holding the flag of the cross and a chalice in her hand. The scene symbolizes the victory of Ekklesia over Synagogue,
Christianity in triumph over Judaism. The antithesis of defeated enemy Other versus victorious Self couldn’t be represented more vividly—and more bluntly in alignment with the “pagan” type rather than Paul’s messianic antitype. The scene amounts, as I would like to suggest, to nothing less than a Christianized version of the *Suicidal Galatians* and the well established iconographic type of anti-barbarian warfare that has shaped the matrix of Western culture since its mythological past in the Giant and anti-Amazon battles of Greco-Roman antiquity.

*To conclude:*

All throughout the history of interpretation, we have never read Paul’s letter to the Galatians, a core document of the Christian canon and the Protestant Reformation, with these images of the *Dying Galatians* next to our Greek text, right “before our eyes”. Can we ignore them? At what price? What changes in our interpretation if we look typologically-critically at our text and these images simultaneously? Paul’s theology of the cross and justification represents the messianic subversion and deconstruction of the antithetical binaries of Self and Other that constitute the matrix and mythology of our civilization. For him, Christ’s death is world-saving because it interrupts the spiral of violence and counter-violence that makes the “Ones” go down so that the “Others” can go up in endless cycles of warfare and aggression, conquest and consumption. Paul’s image of *Christ Crucified* re-imagines the archetypal imaginary of perpetual combat and competition through the counter-imagination of collaboration and community, replacing the deadly law of conquest with the Law of love and life and Self-giving (Gal 6:2). At a time when images of death and destruction are all-pervasive in our cultural imaginary, this messianic iconoclasm, this metamorphosis of death-dealing images into images of life is more needed than
ever; for like Living Crosses the images of the Dying Barbarians in their countless ancient and contemporary versions strike back—but they hit us ourselves. Ultimately, they are suicidal.

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