A KING ON THE MOVE: 
THE PLACE OF AN ITINERANT COURT IN 
CHARLEMAGNE’S GOVERNMENT

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In 1965, Adolf Gauert published a now famous map of Charlemagne’s itinerary. It was produced in association with the Council of Europe’s Charlemagne exhibition at Aachen and was a remarkable piece of reconstruction and investigation of battlefields and military camps, episcopal sees, monasteries and royal residences, and even the site of the canal Charlemagne tried to build to connect the Rhine and Danube rivers. The map claimed to illustrate how the king at one time or another throughout his reign moved right across western Europe, from the Pyrenees to the Elbe, from the English Channel almost to the Danube Bend, and across the Alps as far south as Capua.¹ This picture of a king on the move accorded with the received understanding of itinerant kingship, developed in relation to the Ottonian and Salian rulers of Germany in the late tenth and eleventh century and often extrapolated to many other medieval realms.² I shall argue in this paper that such an understanding of Charlemagne as an itinerant king in the technical sense is simply inappropriate in relation to early Carolingian government. I want to challenge in particular the validity of one category of information on which Gauert relied to map the king’s movements. This is the charter evidence, though in this respect Gauert was simply following standard practice in all studies of medieval rulers. In every existing study of a king’s movements in the Middle Ages, it is assumed that the charter or royal diploma in the king’s name is also confirmation of the king’s presence. I shall suggest here that we should abandon this assumed correlation, and that once we have done

so, a very different picture of Charlemagne’s itinerary between 768 and 814, and consequently of his government, emerges.

Let me first explain how itinerant kingship is usually defined. It is a ‘form of government in which a king carries out all the administrative functions and symbolic representations of governing by periodically or constantly travelling throughout the areas of his dominion.’ Thus it is not merely the ceremonial circumambulation of the royal progress to take symbolic possession of the kingdom, but actually a means of ruling. The king’s subjects came to him in the places he visited. The *iter* was also a vehicle for the king’s sacrality in the Ottonian period. The itinerary is thought to reflect not only the relationship between the importance of personality and personal power, regarded as an essential characteristic of medieval kings, but also the limited extent of the use of writing in government. Indeed, both the size of the kingdom and poor written communications have been posited as strong determining factors for the practice of itinerant kingship. Two other interlocking elements have been identified. The first is the notion of the palace as part of an economic system. It has been assumed, for the Carolingian period as well as for the Ottonian, that the king would not use his own resources from the royal estates and that anyone coming to a royal palace would expect to be fed by the king. Such a focus on the economic logistics of provision has sometimes become confused with necessity, so that a persistent image has been created of the king and his court as nomadic pastoralists or even a plague of locusts eating up the local produce and constantly on the move in search of new pasture. The Carolingians are even claimed to have had to renounce the idea of a fixed centre of government for economic reasons, and to content themselves with different royal residences. This does not make sense for the richly endowed early Carolingian rulers and what has been pieced together about the royal estates in the Frankish heartlands as well as on newly confiscated land from Westphalian, Saxon, and Bavarian landholders. Most crucially, discussions of the king’s

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4 Bernhardt, *Itinerant and Royal Monasteries*, p. 293.