‘On the Road Again’—a phrase from a well-known American country song by Willie Nelson—aptly portrays the lives of many medieval European kings, who spent much time in the saddle traversing their kingdoms. In the memorable words of Karl Leyser, “Itinerancy was the lot of kings, long absence the great evil”. This applies most aptly to the kings of Medieval Germany from about 919 to 1200 and beyond, who developed the most extensive, long-practised, and fully itinerant kingship in Medieval Europe. For these rulers, the perambulation of the realm, the royal iter, was an essential and highly administered institution of governing. With their entire court they travelled almost constantly to govern their kingdom. Eckhard Müller-Mertens has argued convincingly that in Medieval Germany the royal itinerary and methods of accommodation supporting it were structures of the longue durée. Established by the Saxon/Ottonian kings in the mid tenth century and reaching back into the Carolingian era, some of these structures, especially certain “landscapes of kingship” and royal palaces, remained relatively constant for over 200 years into the twelfth century. Only then under the Staufer dynasty of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries does one see significant and permanent alterations of these main structures or the patterns of their use, although more prescribed and limited itinerant rulership did continue. I will survey this fundamental institution of kingship in Germany briefly in order to highlight continuities and changes over time. I will limit myself to the German realm north of the Alps because it experienced a more constant royal presence and has been studied more broadly. Moreover, the imperial expeditions to Italy and the royal iter there has its own dynamic, and only after the mid twelfth century did the German Hohenstaufen kings begin to spend as much or more time in Italy than in Germany. Finally, I will demonstrate

---

1 Leyser, *Rule and Conflict*, 103.
2 Müller-Mertens, “Reich und Hauptorte”, 156–58 with esp. n. 82. Zotz, “Carolingian Tradition”, esp. 94–100, sees similar long-term structures at work.
that the rulers from the Ottonian and early Salian dynasties travelled more frequently and extensively within the kingdom of Germany than did their successors. For these early German kings, itinerant rulership was a growing and consciously administered institution of governing.

I will begin with some general comments about itinerant kingship and then move to more specific ones about its characteristics in various eras of Medieval Germany. Technically, itinerant kingship refers to a method of government whereby a king carries out all of the practical functions and symbolic representations of governing, by periodically or constantly travelling throughout his dominion. Travelling kings, but not necessarily itinerant kingship, existed throughout all Europe during most of the Middle Ages. Such royal travelling or itinerancy also existed beyond the geographical and cultural boundaries of Europe, for instance, in Africa, Iran, Indonesia, and the South Sea Islands, lasting in some places far beyond the end of the European Middle Ages. Itinerant kingship thus designates a method of government found widely in many societies and determined by various economic, social, political, religious, and cultural factors. Societies employing this kind of rulership display certain common characteristics: a largely natural economy; the dominance of peasant farmers by warriors or clans; governmental authority deriving from personal relationships; magical or sacred conceptions of rulership; and a marginal reliance on writing and centralised administrative government. In such societies, kings or chiefs moved constantly or periodically throughout their territories making their presence felt, reinforcing the personal bonds of their rulership, taking part in solemnities, and giving justice. The itinerary dramatised in concrete terms the fact that the king was ruling by marking the limits of the ruler’s active domain, integrating the multiple centres of power in the realm, and legitimising the notion that the ruler received his sovereignty from God (or the gods).

---

3 Recently, some Carolingian scholars correctly have begun to question the broadly held idea that itinerant kingship existed in Carolingian Europe. They have indicated that while Carolingian kings travelled they were not truly itinerant in the same way as the Ottonian and Salian kings of Germany because they largely did not travel as constantly, they did not travel with their entire court, and they made much greater use of written communication and officials in governing. See McKitterick, Charlemagne, 171–78, 212–13 and Goldberg, Struggle for Empire, 206–30, esp. 222–26.