Until now, Alexander Agricola’s relationship to the Aragonese court of Naples has been attested by seven letters and one payroll document that date from between 25 April 1492 and 4 September 1493; these provide the following information: (1) Agricola visited the Neapolitan court of Ferrante I for a short time in May–June of 1492, having arrived there from Florence shortly before the 13th of May; (2) he left Naples by 13 June at the latest, in response to a request from Charles VIII that he return to France; (3) although Agricola could not have been in Naples for more than a few weeks—Ferrante even refers to “alcuni iorni” (letter of 13 June 1492)—he made a favorable enough impression that Ferrante asked Charles to permit Agricola to return to Naples; (4) by February of 1493, Ferrante had obviously been negotiating with Agricola (probably without Charles’ knowledge), and was instructing his ambassador at the French court—Giovanni Battista Coppola—to recruit the composer, presumably for the royal chapel, to offer him a yearly salary of 300 ducats; and to promise to cover the expenses of the trip to Naples; (5) by June of that year, however, Ferrante had changed his mind and was instructing Coppola (and repeating his instructions in subsequent letters of August and September) to inform Agricola that his services were no longer wanted, because the situation at the court had been drastically altered by “le occurentie de Italia” (letter of 12 August): Naples’ emerging political crisis, dramatized that past April by the ratification of the Pact of San Marco, which left Ferrante without allies among the Italian powers and thus politically isolated; as Ferrante said of Agricola in his letter of 12 August: “non havemo bisogno de ipso.” And there the story of Agricola’s relationship to the
court of Naples seemed to end, since there was no indication that he ever returned.

Now, however, new evidence has come to light that demonstrates that, despite the unequivocal nature of Ferrante's remarks in his last three letters, Agricola's relationship with the Neapolitan court did not end with his visit of 1492. Moreover, the evidence also provides new biographical information about the composer Johannes Ghiselin (alias Verbonnet).

The evidence consists of references in two letters that the humanist-diplomat Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena wrote to Piero de' Medici from Naples early in 1494. The first letter, dated 10 February for Naples, thus causing (2) the letter of 13 May 1492 to be written—Piero to Niccolò Michelozzi, the Florentine emissary at Naples, who was instructed to find Agricola there and have him comply with Charles' request; (3) 13 June 1492—Ferrante to Charles, in which Ferrante informs him that Agricola had left Naples and was on his way back to France; (4) 11 February 1493—Ferrante to Coppola, in which Agricola is offered a position at Naples; and (5-7) 12 June, 12 August, and 4 September 1493—Ferrante to Coppola, in which Ferrante withdraws the offer.

The payroll document is a notice from the SS Annunziata of Florence and is dated 28 October 1492; the notice states that Agricola received twelve gold florins, "his salary for the four months when he was in Rome and Naples" (Frank D'Accone, "A Documentary History of Music at the Florentine Cathedral and Baptistry during the 15th Century", 2 vols. [Ph. D. diss., Harvard Univ., 1960]. vol. I, p. 209). At the very least, the notice shows—assuming, of course, that Agricola received the payment in person and that the notice is not recording a transaction that occurred a month or two earlier—that Agricola traveled slowly on his way back to France, stopping in Rome and Florence along the way. Perhaps he was even in Rome as late as September, and met Piero de' Medici and three singers in Piero's employ, all of whom had gone to Rome on the occasion of the election of Alexander VI to the papal throne (see below). It seems, then, that although Ferrante told Charles that Agricola had left Naples as of 13 June, the composer may not have returned to Charles' court until well into November or even December.


Finally, the conjectural identification (offered in Atlas, "Alexander Agricola," p. 319) of Agricola with the "Alessandro Alemanno" who is recorded in Naples in 1456 remains just that.

Dovizi (1470–1520), best known as the author of the comedy La calandria and as one of the characters in Castiglione's The Courtier, was a member of the Medici circle and was raised to the rank of cardinal by Giovanni de' Medici, who became Pope Leo X in 1513. On Dovizi, see G. L. Moncallero, Il cardinale Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena.
1494, reports in detail on the audience that Dovizi had just had with the new King of Naples, Alfonso II (Ferrante had died seventeen days earlier, on 25 January); it concludes as follows:

Lo Agricola vostro sta bene et intendo che c'è anch'ora Verbonetto, ma io non l'ho visto.

The second letter, dated 6 March, is concerned principally with Neapolitan-Papal political matters; it, too, ends with a reference to the two musicians:

Verbonetto se è partito di qua et andato per la moglie, è ben visto et charezzato del S. re. Il vostro Alexandro Agricola si raccomanda a voi.

Clearly, then, both Agricola and Ghiselin were present at the court of Naples in February and March of 1494, and Ghiselin had departed as of 6 March in order to get his wife.

What is not clear, however, are the circumstances surrounding either Agricola's return to Naples or Ghiselin's first known appearance there. And for now we can do little more than suggest a few possibilities and comment on their likelihood; one should remember, all the while, that the currently-available documentation for the previous phase of each composer's career places Agricola at the royal court of France in August or September of 1493 and Ghiselin in the chapels of the Cathedral and the SS Annunziata of Florence at the end of March 1493.\(^5\)

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\(^4\) Moncallero, ed., *Epistolario*, I, p. 62. Both letters are printed in their entirety in ibid., pp. 35–39 and 60–62; Grimaldi, pp. 220–22, printed part of the 10 February letter but omitted the concluding references to the musicians. The originals are preserved in the Archivio di Stato, Florence, Mediceo avant il Principato, filza 49, Nos. 247 and 259.

\(^5\) We say August or September because it is possible that Agricola had already left the French court by the time Ferrante wrote his final letter concerning him on 4 September. At the very least, however, Ferrante was under the impression that Agricola was still there, and it seems safe to conclude that the composer was still at Charles' court at least into early August, when Ferrante had written his 12 August letter concerning him.

\(^6\) D'Accone, "The Singers of San Giovanni in Florence during the 15th Century," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* XIV (1961), 345; Clytus Gottwald, "Ghiselin
One possibility that can be discounted immediately is that Agricola was summoned from France by Alfonso II after the latter had succeeded to the throne. As already noted, Ferrante had died on 25 January 1494 (the funeral took place a week later, on 2 February), only seventeen days before Dovizi saw Agricola at Naples. Thus even if Alfonso's very first act as king was to call Agricola from France, there would have been far too little time for the composer to have received the invitation and to have made the trip to Naples by 10 February.

It is also unlikely—though not impossible—that it was Ferrante who called Agricola to Naples. As we have seen, Ferrante's last three letters to Coppola make it very clear that he no longer wanted Agricola to come to Naples: (1) 12 June 1493—"Del venire de Alexandro musico . . . noi adesso non stamo in disposizione de volerlo . . . non volimo che venga per cosa alcuna de presente . . ."; (2) 12 August 1493—"non havevamo bisogno de alexandro cantore per la occurrencie de Italia . . . non havemo bisogno de ipso . . ."; and (3) 4 September 1493—"Quando tocca ad alexandro cantore . . . noi non [lo] volimo . . .". Ferrante could not have been more explicit. And while one might argue that Ferrante could have changed his mind, the background for the three letters suggests otherwise. Perhaps we could account for such a change of mind had Ferrante's decision to withdraw his offer to Agricola resulted from artistic or personal considerations, had he concluded that he could find a superior musician, for example, or had the negotiations with Agricola reached an impasse on the issue of salary or some similar issue. However, Ferrante gives only one reason for discontinuing the negotiations: his difficult political circumstances. And after his final letter of 4 September, the political situation became worse, not better, as is suggested by the pessimistic report that the king received from his astute chancellor-secretary, Giovanni Pontano, a few weeks later: 12 October 1493—"L'Italia tutta è congiurata contro la potenza e stato vostro," and, even more to the point: "Francia vi viene adosso." In other words, if in September of 1493 Ferrante was determined not to hire Agricola because of the emerging political situation, it is almost inconceivable that he would have changed his mind in the months that followed and proceeded to

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[Verbonnet], Johannes, "The New Grove Dictionary VIII, 340. Ghiselin's service was terminated as a result of the closing of the chapels at that time (see below). Prior to his service in Florence, Ghiselin was in Ferrara; see Lewis Lockwood, Music in Renaissance Ferrara, 1400–1505 (Cambridge, 1984), p. 272, who states that Ghiselin was a singer in Ferrara "definitely Jan.-Oct. 1492, . . ."


8 Atlas, Music at the Aragonese Court, p. 5; Ernesto Pontieri, Per la storia del regno di Ferrante I d'Aragona, re di Napoli, 2nd ed. (Naples, 1968), pp. 572–73.
hire not only Agricola, but Ghiselin as well. Thus it is presumably
Alfonso II's interest that explains the two composers' presence in
Naples in 1494.

As noted, Alfonso could not possibly have summoned Agricola
from France between the time he became king, on 25 January 1494,9
and the date of Dovizi's first letter, 10 February. Thus if we maintain
that it was Alfonso who called Agricola and Ghiselin to Naples—and
we shall see that it is unlikely that Ghiselin arrived at Naples long
before Dovizi's first letter was written—we must further posit that
Agricola, rather than being at the court of Charles VIII at that time,
must instead have been no more than a few days' journey from Naples
at the very most.10 We might speculate further that since Agricola
and Ghiselin were in Naples together, they may well have travelled there
together.

Dovizi's own words suggest a conclusion. In both of his letters to
Piero de' Medici, Dovizi speaks of "vostro . . . Agricola" (italics added)
and he tells Piero that the composer "si raccomanda a voi." Do his
words signal a closer and more recent relationship between Agricola
and Piero than we might have assumed on the basis of the documents
hitherto available? These permit us to infer that Agricola and Piero
had last been in contact in: (1) April or May of 1492, when Agricola
left the service of the Cathedral at Florence and went to Naples, or (2)
September of 1492, when they could have met in Rome (see note 1),
or (3) October of 1492, when Agricola was last recorded at the SS
Annunziata. Moreover, one should remember that Piero's father,
Lorenzo the Magnificent, died on 8 April 1492, and that the period of
Agricola's Florentine service (October of 1491 through April of
1492), with the exception of the final three weeks, coincided with the
last months of Lorenzo's \textit{de facto} "rule," rather than with Piero's. And
that Piero, finally, had no claim on Agricola at any time in 1492 is
suggested by the composer's reluctant but unequivocal submission to
Charles' will and his return to France. Thus we interpret Dovizi's
phrase "your Agricola" as evidence that the composer either was then
or had just been in Piero's personal employ, and therefore that he had
very recently been in Florence.

As for Ghiselin, we offer two comments. First, Dovizi writes that
Ghiselin "è ben visto et charazato del S. re." Such language does not
suggest a relationship of long standing between Ghiselin and Alfonso.
Rather, it implies that Ghiselin had only recently arrived in Naples

9 We might note, however, that the official coronation took place only on 8 May.
10 Obviously, Alfonso could have sent to France for Agricola prior to Ferrante's
death, that is, while he was still the Duke of Calabria. However, there is no evidence to
suggest that he did.
and that Alfonso received him favorably. Second, Dovizi tells Piero that the composer “se è partito di qua et andato per la mogle.” To be sure, Dovizi does not say explicitly that the composer is going to Florence to get his wife—and perhaps we should argue that, if Florence was in fact Ghiselin’s immediate destination, Dovizi would have so informed Piero—but neither does he imply that Ghiselin had undertaken a more extended journey, to judge from the casual nature of the report. And given that Ghiselin’s last securely-documented place of employment before his appearance in Naples was Florence, in March of 1493, the hypothesis that he was returning there for his wife is both attractive and simple.

Having speculated that Agricola and Ghiselin had arrived in Naples only shortly before Dovizi’s first letter and had travelled there from Florence, we must offer an hypothesis as to the nature of their activity in Florence in late 1493 and early 1494, specifically because the chapels at the public institutions had been disbanded in March of 1493 in response to Savonarola’s preaching. Polyphonic practice did not disappear from Florence entirely, and a number of singers who had been members of the public chapels simply entered—or continued in—the employ of private patrons. Already in September of 1492, while the chapels at the public institutions were still functioning, Heinrich Isaac, Colinet de Lannoy (who travelled from Mantua together with Agricola in the fall of 1491; Verbonnet, too, was associated with the Mantuan court), and Pietrequin Bonnel were members of the “famiglia del Magnifico [sic] Piero” that accompanied Piero to Rome at that time. Similarly, an “Elenco di familiari di casa Medici al tempo del Magnifico Piero” refers to an unspecified number of “cantori” in Piero’s private employ. Although the roster bears no date, it can be assigned to the period between Lorenzo’s death in April of 1492 and the expulsion of the Medici from Florence in November of 1494. Thus musicians continued to find employment in Florence during the short period of Piero’s de facto “rule,” and presumably it was his personal initiative that would explain Ghiselin’s decision to

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11 The phrase “è ben visto” uses the verb “vedere” just as Ferrante had employed it in his letter to Charles—“lo havemo visto voluntieri”—that is, to express his pleasure at just having met Agricola.

12 On the other hand, perhaps Dovizi reasoned that Ghiselin, having already left Naples, would arrive in Florence before the courier bearing his letter and that Piero, therefore, would have been aware independently of Ghiselin’s presence in Florence.


14 Ibid., p. 344, n. 186.


17 The document is preserved in the Archivio di Stato, Florence, Mediceo avanti il Principato, filza 88, fol. 28or.
stay in Florence after his tenure in the Cathedral chapel had concluded and Agricola’s decision to leave the services of Charles VIII and journey to Florence once again.

In all, the hypothesis that Agricola and Ghiselin arrived in Naples from Florence at the very end of January or during the first days of February, 1494, obviates the need to account for a physically-impossible journey on Agricola’s part or a psychologically-impossible change of mind on Ferrante’s. At the same time it follows logically from Dovizi’s letters. Indeed, why would Dovizi even have mentioned Agricola and Ghiselin to Piero had he not believed that Piero would be interested in their welfare? And such interest on Piero’s part presumably makes sense only if he and the two musicians had recently been in contact. Perhaps they were even still in his service and had simply been “lent” to the Aragonese court, just as Florence had been “lending” sculptors and architects to Alfonso for the past decade for purposes of his “artistic renewal” of Naples.18

To return to Naples and Alfonso II, we pose two final questions, the first of which must remain unanswered, while the second invites still further speculation. First, how long did Agricola and Ghiselin remain in Naples? According to Dovizi, Ghiselin had already left Naples by 6 March, ostensibly to get his wife and return. Certainly, however, he would not have been the first musician of the period to fail to complete a “round trip,” and there is no way of knowing whether or not he returned to Naples. As for Agricola, we have no information whatsoever. The least extravagant hypothesis is that both composers had surely left Naples by February of 1495, a full year later, when the forces of Charles VIII entered Naples and began their five-month occupation of the city. Yet perhaps there are still other plausible hypotheses: given Agricola’s former ties with Charles and the next known reference to Ghiselin (a letter of 1501, written by the Ferrarese ambassador to France, that places him in the service of Charles’ successor, Louis XII),19 one could also reasonably speculate that they remained in Naples and were among those who welcomed the French invaders (see below, note 20).

Second, since Ferrante had decided not to hire Agricola because of unfavorable political conditions, we may ask why Alfonso II should have received both Agricola and Ghiselin at the court. To begin with, one should remember the reasons for Ferrante’s decision: he did not

wish to hire a musician who commanded so high a salary, and specifically not on a long-term basis. Alfonso, on the other hand, may well have been doing little more than hosting two short-term visitors who were in Piero de’ Medici’s employ, and doing so simply to inaugurate his reign by improving the quality of a deteriorated musical establishment, at least temporarily, with the services of two musicians of the first rank. Dovizi, after all, says “your Agricola” to Piero, not “Alfonso’s Agricola,” and he seems almost to express surprise that Ghiselin was “still there.”

But even if Alfonso had received the two musicians with the understanding that they would become regular members of the Neapolitan chapel (how short-term could the visit have been if Ghiselin troubled to go for his wife?), his decision would underscore the temperamental differences that characterized father and son. Ferrante was nothing if not practical. In arranging royal marriages so as to reinforce political alliances, in restructuring the Neapolitan Studio so as to promote the study of law and civic values, he was eminently pragmatic. His decision to withdraw his offer to Agricola suggests that he understood full well that political survival took precedence over artistic matters. Alfonso II, on the contrary, was typically less circumspect; to cite only two especially vivid examples: in 1481 he led his troops against the Turks atop the walls of Otranto with almost reckless disregard for the possible consequences, and, in 1494, when the French invasion was imminent, he planned the most extravagant coronation for himself that Naples had ever seen. At times, in fact, one may question Alfonso’s psychological condition during the last months of his life. Indeed, his complicated psychological state is suggested by the contrast between his perception of his political circumstances, as Dovizi recorded it, and the political situation as it actually was. In his letter of 10 February, Dovizi reported that Alfonso remarked at length on the excellent relations that existed between Naples and Florence and exclaimed proudly, to quote Dovizi, “Io

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20 Again, the coronation took place on 8 May. Concerning the question of how long the two musicians remained in Naples, can we perhaps assume that Alfonso would at least have wished to retain them until May, so that they could take part in the coronation ceremonies?
21 Atlas, Music at the Aragonese Court, p. 52.
24 Hersey, p. 5.
25 On Alfonso’s psychological state during the months before his death in an Olivetan monastery in Sicily on 19 November 1495 (he abdicated on 23 January of that year, one month before the French occupation), see Hersey, p. 6.
sono mezo fiorentino,”26 even after Pontano had emphatically told Ferrante—in his report of 12 October 1493—that among the Italian states plotting against him: “A questo fine concorrono principalmente Fiorentini, si per le cose hanno patite per la guerra fatta da vostro padre Alfonso I e da Voi, si per essere da natura francesi. . .”27 Thus if Alfonso II did intend to hire both Agricola and Ghiselin as full-time members of his chapel, even after Ferrante had prudently declined the opportunity to hire Agricola, Alfonso’s decision would have been perfectly consistent with what we know of his personal characteristics.

To sum up, Dovizi’s letters to Piero de’ Medici of 10 February and 6 March of 1494 shed new light on the careers of Agricola and Ghiselin. They demonstrate unequivocally that both composers were at the Aragonese court of Naples in February and early March of 1494, and they imply, if we have interpreted them correctly, that both musicians were in some way associated with Piero de’ Medici in Florence just prior to that time. In addition, they illustrate once more that extensive travel and varied conditions of employment marked the careers of many musicians of the time, as is suggested by Agricola’s activity during the three years from early 1491 to early 1494, which can now be documented as follows: he was (1) at the court of Charles VIII at the beginning of 1491; (2) briefly (?) in Mantua shortly before arriving at Florence in October of 1491;28 (3) in Florence from October of 1491 through April of 1492; (4) in Naples for a few weeks—perhaps even just a few days—in May–June of 1492; (5) in Rome and Florence—as he returned slowly to France—during the period from June to late October (?) of that year; (6) at the court of Charles VIII again from perhaps November of 1492 through August or September of 1493, at least; (7) possibly in Florence by the end of 1493 or the beginning of 1494; and (8) definitely in Naples once more in February and March of 1494. And finally, the letters serve to remind us once again of the many gaps in our knowledge of the lives and careers of even the most noted composers of the period and of the slow but steady progress that we are making in filling them in.

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27 Atlas, Music at the Aragonese Court, p. 5; Pontieri, Per la storia, pp. 572–73.