

Anna Marciniak-Kajzer

<https://doi.org/10.26485/AAL/2020/66/8>

**FIREPLACES IN LATE MEDIEVAL HOUSES.  
AN ATTEMPT TO RECONSTRUCT THE APPEARANCE AND FUNCTIONS  
BASED ON ICONOGRAPHIC SOURCES**

**ABSTRACT** The main aim of this work is to show what fireplaces looked like in the Middle Ages, and more importantly, what functions they could have performed. In the archaeological literature until now, it has been claimed that they were not kitchen hearths, but could only be used to heat meals. In this paper, I show that this claim is unfounded. A long search for suitable illustrations led to the discovery of a number of unique representations of fireplaces. Thanks to its frequent presentation in medieval painting, significant differences are noticeable in the way of presenting material culture and its details. The analysis presented in this paper made it possible to identify one more important issue concerning fireplaces that has not yet received any comments. So far, it has been emphasized that religious-themed performances are marked by symbolism and show typical scenes in a fairly unified way. Other ways of presentation of religious scenes have not been taken into account. Scenes showing saints in manuscripts present them in more everyday circumstances than in the panel painting. Unfortunately, such images are extremely rare, here I present one of the more interesting scenes at the fireplace – the Holy Family having dinner.

Key words: Middle Ages, fireplaces, iconographic sources

**KOMINKI W DOMACH W PÓŹNYM ŚREDNIOWIECZU.  
PRÓBA REKONSTRUKCJI WYGLĄDU I FUNKCJI  
W ŚWIETLE ŹRÓDEŁ IKONOGRAFICZNYCH**

**ABSTRAKT** Celem tej pracy jest pokazanie, jak wyglądały kominki w średniowieczu, a co ważniejsze, jakie funkcje mogły pełnić. Dotychczas w literaturze archeologicznej twierdzono, że nie były one paleniskami kuchennymi, a mogły służyć jedynie do podgrzewania potraw. W tej pracy pokazuję, że nie jest to prawdą. Długie poszukiwania odpowiednich ilustracji doprowadziły do odnalezienia unikalnych przedstawień kominków. Pomimo ich częstego prezentowania w średniowiecznym malarstwie, istotne różnice zauważalne są w szczegółach, w sposobie przedstawienia kultury materialnej. W czasie przeprowadzania tej analizy udało się również wskazać na jeszcze jedno istotne zagadnienie, które jak dotąd nie doczekało się komentarzy. Dotychczas podkreślano, że przedstawienia o tematyce religijnej są nacechowane symboliką i pokazują typowe sceny w dość zunifikowany sposób. Nie zwracano uwagi na inną zależność. Sceny przedstawiające świętych zamieszczane w manuskryptach ukazują ich w bardziej codziennych okolicznościach, aniżeli ma to miejsce w malarstwie tablicowym. Niestety takie wizerunki są niezmiernie rzadkie, tutaj prezentuję jedną z bardziej interesujących scen – Święta Rodzina jedząca kolację.

Słowa kluczowe: średniowiecze, kominki, średniowieczne malarstwo, manuskrypty

A fireplace evolved directly from an open hearth. Its emergence was described based on ethnographic research by, among others, K. Moszyński.<sup>1</sup> Much was also written about fireplaces by architects and archaeologists studying the remains of medieval

houses, such as M. Dąbrowska,<sup>2</sup> M. Chorowska,<sup>3</sup> and J. Piekalski.<sup>4</sup> All their works also analyse the function of a fireplace, obviously assuming its role as a heater. Another important purpose which was lighting the room was mostly described by

<sup>1</sup> Moszyński 1929: 516.

<sup>2</sup> Dąbrowska 1992: 178; 2004: 173-188.

<sup>3</sup> Chorowska 1995: 135; 2004: 135-155.

<sup>4</sup> Piekalski 2004: 29-50; 2004a: 51-60.



Fig. 1. The Holy Family at supper. An illustration from *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, a manuscript created in the Netherlands ca 1440.

Today found in the collection of the Morgan Library & Museum in New York. Public domain

M. Dąbrowska,<sup>5</sup> while the role of a fireplace as a device for cooking was frequently overlooked or negated. Researchers usually suggested that it was only used to heat up meals.<sup>6</sup> It comes as no surprise: our present image of a fireplace as an indicator of luxury is rather fixed, even though M. Dąbrowska tried to undermine it.<sup>7</sup> A fireplace is now generally associated with a device found in

elegant rooms. Nevertheless, in my papers on medieval kitchens,<sup>8</sup> I already wrote about the fact that it could have been a typical kitchen device.

This paper, however, I would like to devote to slightly different issues. We have quite a lot images of interiors from the Late Middle Ages. Naturally, the problem is chronology. In this paper, I include the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the Middle Ages, even though in some European countries painting of this period is classified as Renaissance. I am not going to discuss fireplaces found in castle and monastery kitchens

<sup>5</sup> Dąbrowska 2004: 173-188.

<sup>6</sup> Buśko 2002: 309-315.

<sup>7</sup> Dąbrowska 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Marciniak-Kajzer 2013: 449-161; 2019: 191-205.





Fig. 2. Ibn Butlan, *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, Latin translation from the turn of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.  
A copy from the French National Library. Public domain

as this is a completely different issue requiring separate studies.

Let us focus now on the title iconography. Representations of kitchen activities were relatively rare in the medieval art. Thus, the use of fireplaces for preparing meals is not a common theme. Such images can sometimes be found in illuminated manuscripts, which can be exemplified by three preserved copies of *Tacuinum Sanitatis* and later drawings based on them,<sup>9</sup> all kinds of

*Regimina sanitatis* – simple works with a lecture on hygiene and diet as well as different editions of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.<sup>10</sup> Drawings in such works show rooms in which meals were prepared. The fireplaces depicted are usually quite big, with

being translations of Ibn Butlan's work. They have been preserved in Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome, and in Vienna. Scattered illustrations from other copies have also survived. The first printed version of the work dates back to 1531.

<sup>10</sup> I can only encourage readers to see the drawings, for example, on the Internet. Problems with copyrights make it impossible for me to include more images of interest.

<sup>9</sup> *Tacuinum Sanitatis* are medieval treaties on a healthy lifestyle and a good diet from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, written down in Lombardy based on Arabic works, most





Fig. 3. The middle panel of *The Mérode Altarpiece*, also called *The Triptych of the Master of Flémalle*, created by Robert Campin and his students. It was most probably painted between 1427 and 1432 in Tournai (today located in Belgium, earlier located in the Netherlands). Now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Public domain

fire lit level with the floor. Such hearths are usually not separated from the room. Typically, there are cauldrons of different sizes hanging over the fire. They do not hang by a simple chain with a hook but a much more complex mechanism allowing to hang the cauldron on different heights, and so to regulate the temperature. In many cases, a low spit or, sporadically, a gridiron can be seen above the hearth, with a dripping pot underneath. Sometimes, there are more complicated ceramic or iron supports that allowed to place the spit on a selected height. Devices of this type are also uncovered by archaeologists.<sup>11</sup>

An analysis of such representations makes one conclude that thermal treatment of meals, mostly meat, rarely involved gridirons as they are not frequently found in iconographic representations of kitchens. In the drawings, they usually have the form of a rectangular frame with parallel bars, with the whole structure resting on four legs. Most of them also include an iron handle. Drawings of a different kind offer us another idea of what they could look like. Spits in drawings much more frequently than in the kitchen are depicted in images of saints who died a martyr's death in fire. In the territory of Poland, this style of depiction usually concerns Saint Sophia with her daughters, one of whom is usually holding a spit. Such images can be found in Gothic altars in churches in Łopuszna,

<sup>11</sup> Buśko 2002: 309-315.



Grybów, and Kamionka Mała.<sup>12</sup> Another martyr whose attribute is considered to be a gridiron is Saint Lawrence. His image can be found, for example, in the altar in the church in Rusek.<sup>13</sup> A comparison of representations of kitchen gridirons with those from portraits of saints reveals certain differences in structure. Those used for grilling are usually just parallel bars in a frame, while instruments of torture are depicted as more complicated devices, with an additional bar in the middle, joining the crosswise bars. They also have long handles with a round eye.

Among the few illustrations showing fireplaces in the kitchen, one of the most interesting is a miniature from the manuscript of *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves* (Fig. 1).<sup>14</sup> This fireplace was built in an alcove in the wall. It is semicircular, with a protruding semicircular brick hood. Side frames are most probably made of stone and decorated with low reliefs.

It also shows many objects that made kitchen work easier. Most of all, we can see a cauldron hanging on a hook allowing to adjust the height over the fire. The other piece of cookware, a pot with handles and a lid, is standing on embers. The miniature is small and not very detailed, however, it seems that it also depicts a leg of an iron trivet used to place cookware among logs or embers. In the upper part of the fireplace wall, on the right, there is a simple candle holder with a candle. Above it, on the left, there is a rectangular recess with an unidentified object. Below, there is a hanging gridiron, and on the floor there is a double poker. A pair of bellows for kindling fire is hanging on a wall on the right. Above it, there is another candle holder with a candle. This suggests that people were used to the place as a source of light also when the fireplace was put out.

The drawing described above shows a typical fireplace located in a living room also used for preparing meals. The fact that most medieval houses lacked typical kitchens was discussed in my other papers<sup>15</sup>. The illustration also shows an extensive array of kitchenware products. The fireplaces shown usually have only a hook for hanging cauldrons and, in some cases, a spit on supports. Such images can mostly be found in manuscript illustrations depicting the life of ordinary people.



Fig. 4. *The Virgin and Child before a Firescreen*. A painting created ca 1440 by Robert Campin. Today found in the National Gallery in London. Public domain.

A few images of this kind can be seen in *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, in the copy available on the website of the French National Library.<sup>16</sup> Here is one of them (Fig. 2).

In the illustrations in question, the hearth is usually level with the floor, which required an uncomfortable position while cooking, and particularly while roasting meat on a spit that had to be turned. Open fire produced high temperature, and the hoods of the fireplaces depicted are located high, so they could not have collected the whole smoke. Thus, the work was very unpleasant or even onerous.

Let us now focus on the second group of representations. Completely different fireplaces can be seen in paintings showing religious scenes or courts of the high and mighty. Most of all, they are located in rooms that definitely were not used for preparing meals. They are usually depicted in sumptuously decorated rooms with elegant furniture, including those closely connected with fireplaces, such as fireplace benches with movable

<sup>12</sup> *Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce* 2004: 234-5.

<sup>13</sup> At present, it can be found in the National Museum in Wrocław: *Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce* 2004: 153.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/hours-of-catherine-of-cleves/227>

<sup>15</sup> Marciniak-Kajzer 2013: 449-161; 2019: 191-205.

<sup>16</sup> <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105072169/fl.planchecontact>

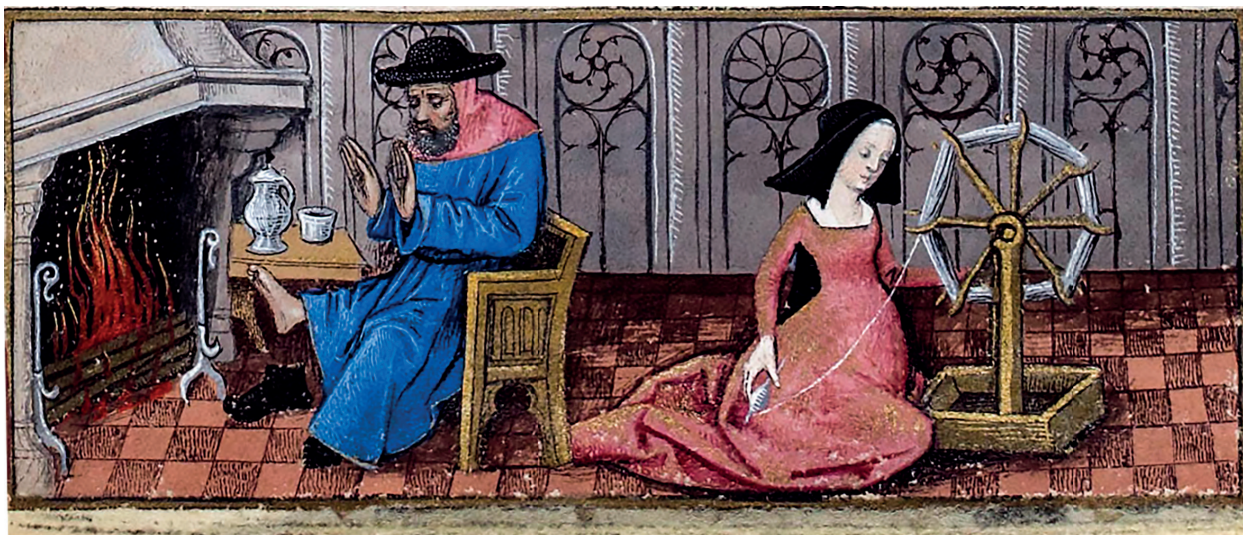


Fig. 5. An illustration from the manuscript *The Heures de Charles d'Angoulême*.

The book was created around the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Today it is kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Public domain

backs, covered with blankets and cushions. These rooms are lit by large windows and lavishly furnished. Such representations are typical of panel painting. We know of a few examples of such paintings.

Unlike in the case of illuminations in manuscripts, it is usually possible to identify the author of panel paintings or the workshop in which they were made. It is also clear that some authors used similar patterns when painting scenes. When talking about rooms with fireplaces, what needs to be mentioned are works from a workshop of one of the greatest masters of the time – Robert Campin, meaning two triptychs. The first is the so-called Mérode Altarpiece completed between 1425 and 1428, also called the triptych of the Master of Flémalle. The central panel represents the Annunciation to Mary (Fig. 3).<sup>17</sup> However, we are interested in the fireplace shown on the right. It is decorated with two pilasters with mascarons located below the capitals. Its most important elements are two iron andirons (also called fire dogs) used for supporting firewood. We can also see an openwork fireplace screen, probably made of wood as there are visible rings, which was to limit the amount of heat generated by the fire. There are

two candlesticks on the hood. An almost identical scene is depicted in the painting *The Annunciation* ascribed to Campin's student Jacques Daret.<sup>18</sup> Another work from the same workshop is the so-called *Werl Triptych* created in 1438, which survived in the form of two panels<sup>19</sup>. One of the two preserved parts shows St. Barbara with a similar, yet more modest, fireplace. Nearly identical andirons support the firewood. However, there is no firescreen, and there is only one candlestick on the hood. In a different painting from Robert Campin's workshop, such a firescreen plays a significant role. I mean *The Virgin and Child before a Firescreen* (Fig. 4). Behind Mary's back, we can see flames in the fireplace shielded by a large round screen made of some kind of plaited material. Also in this case, there are two andirons on both sides.

Andirons are probably most frequently depicted elements of fireplace furnishings. We can see them not only in paintings from the workshop of Robert Camin. Another example is the *Portrait of Abbot Christiaan de Hondt*, painted by Master of 1499, sometimes called the Bruges Master of 1499, found in the collection of The Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The Mérode Altarpiece, also called the triptych of the Master of Flémalle, created by Robert Campin and his students. It was most probably painted between 1427 and 1432 in Tournai (today located in Belgium, earlier located in the Netherlands). Now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Public domain.

<sup>18</sup> The work can be found in the Royal Museums of Fine Art of Belgium in Brussels. Some researchers are of the opinion that it can be older than the Mérode Altarpiece.

<sup>19</sup> The painting is mostly attributed to Rogier van der Weyden. It can be found in the collection of the Museo del Prado. Available in Wikimedia Commons.

<sup>20</sup> This painting can be seen on the website: <https://>





Fig. 6. *January*, a miniature from the manuscript of the Limbourg brothers *The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry*, created ca 1410. Today kept in Musée Condé. Public domain

I have also managed to find representations of andirons in manuscript illustrations showing the life of ordinary people, which may suggest they were quite commonly used. However, as they were made of iron, they definitely were not cheap, so we should only expect them to have been used in rich houses. This can be exemplified by a manuscript illustration from *Heures de Charles d'Angoulême*. It is a book created around the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, currently found in the collection of Bibliothèque Nationale de France and available on its website (Fig. 5)

The radiation of heat from an open hearth was difficult to control, however, we know that people tried to find a solution to it. The iconography provides a few interesting examples. Above, I have already discussed examples of a firescreen in two paintings from the workshop of Robert Campin. Another example can be found in an illustration showing *January* from the cycle *The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry*, depicting a feast (Fig. 6). Behind the feasting people sitting at a table, there is a fireplace. In order to avoid excessive heating, it is covered with a kind of a round shield, probably made of some plaited material. A decorative post standing before it can be a frame it is hung on.

Based on the above information, it can be concluded that representations of home fireplaces can be divided into two main types. The first one shows fireplaces in rooms that today would be called multi-purpose. They served as both living rooms and places for preparing meals. Virtually all representations of this type can be found in manuscript illustrations. This category is dominated by medical books and various chronicles or stories of kings, with few illustrations from narrative sources. In a vast majority of cases, the scenes depicted concern the life of ordinary people. However, this is not always the case. *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves* includes an illustration of the Holy Family at dinner. Perhaps it could be explained by the fact that the scene depicted is not strictly religious. It shows an ordinary day and not an event described in the Bible.

To archaeologists, the illustrations described above are of great significance for several reasons. First of all, we usually do not find many preserved devices of this kind during excavation. And even if we recognise some remains when examining late medieval buildings, we do not find any furnishings. Their lack makes it difficult to determine the purpose of these items, and what I mostly mean is the question of using fireplaces for preparing meals. We also rarely find individual items that could be used in a way depicted in illustrations.

There are not many mentions of gridirons found during excavation in the territory of Poland. Based on the artefacts discovered when exploring medieval Kołobrzeg, Z. Polak distinguished two types of gridirons. The first one had a four-sided frame of quadrilateral bars. Their bent ends formed four legs. Crosswise bars, with flattened ends bent to form handles, were located on two opposite sides. However, most gridirons were probably made by forging crosswise bars together with the frame. The sides of such gridirons were 20-30cm long.<sup>21</sup> Three similar fragments of gridirons dated to the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century were also discovered during research on Granary Island in Gdańsk.<sup>22</sup>

Identifying remains of spits in the excavated material is very difficult. As a last resort, any iron bar could be used. A slightly more characteristic element is usually the handle, which in many cases had the form of a crank that was turned. However, it was not always true, as two spits found in Wrocław

indicate<sup>23</sup>. Two fragments of similar spits were also uncovered during excavation at knight's courts in Rybojady<sup>24</sup> and Tarnów Jeziorny.<sup>25</sup> When roasting meat on a spit, special supports were frequently used, which allowed to regulate the height of the spit above the hearth. This can be exemplified by ceramic supports found in Wrocław. Two of them were uncovered at 3 Kacerska Górka Street, and a third one in Nowy Targ Square. All were richly decorated with ornaments impressed or incised into clay. Other similar items were found in Kołobrzeg and Stargard Szczeciński.<sup>26</sup> We also know of an artefact from a knight's court in Sądowel<sup>27</sup> and fragments of two supports from Elbląg.<sup>28</sup>

Another device depicted in illustrations is a round iron trivet/pot holder. It was mentioned in written sources at least from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was a round iron hoop on three short legs. A pot was placed in it so that it did not topple over.<sup>29</sup>

Another group of representations is closer to the contemporary idea of a fireplace as a device heating the living room. In this case, I have not found in Polish written sources or iconography anything analogous to the most frequently depicted elements – andirons. They were probably not very popular in our country, and simpler spits were used, without decorative vertical stands. Sometimes, however, we are unable to determine what items sources refer to. For example, court documents from 1447 recorded a plaintiff mentioning 'fireplace iron'.<sup>30</sup>

It is similar in the case of double pokers depicted in several illustrations, typical of Western Europe. In our region, people used single bars with a hook at the end. I have not found any descriptions of firescreens in the sources, so I am unable to say whether such devices were used in the territory of Poland in the Middle Ages, and finding them in archaeological material is rather unlikely. They were made of organic materials, which do not preserve well in the ground, and even if some elements, such as stands, were preserved, their correct interpretation would be extremely difficult on account of their nondescript appearance.

<sup>23</sup> Buśko 2002: 314.

<sup>24</sup> In this case, the artefact comes from earlier research and its dating is uncertain: Hensel, Hilczek-Kurnatowska 1980: 455.

<sup>25</sup> Nowakowski 2017: 153.

<sup>26</sup> Buśko 2002: 312-313.

<sup>27</sup> Nowakowski 2017: 153.

<sup>28</sup> Nawroński 1990: 40.

<sup>29</sup> Rutkowska-Płachcińska 1978: 275.

<sup>30</sup> Dembiński, 2005: 573.

<sup>21</sup> Polak, Polak 1998: 211.

<sup>22</sup> Trawicka 2010: 103.



Using iconographic sources allows us to significantly broaden our knowledge of the material culture of medieval people. I hope that the information provided in this paper will contribute to the discussion about the location of fireplaces and their functions in late medieval houses.

## Literature

- Buśko C. 2002. *Archeolog w kuchni*. In: C. Buśko (ed.), *Civitas et villa. Miasto i wieś w średniowiecznej Europie Środkowej*, Wrocław-Praha, 309-315.
- Chorowska M. 1995. *Z badań nad średniowieczną kamienicą mieszczańską we Wrocławiu*, In: K. Wachowski (ed.), *Kultura średniowiecznego Śląska i Czech: Miasto*, Wrocław, 129-138.
- Chorowska M. 2004. *Z badań nad funkcją i wyposażeniem średniowiecznych siedzib feudalnych na Śląsku*, *Archaeologia Historica Polona* 14, 135-155.
- Dąbrowska M. 1992. *Kominek – luksus czy konieczność?*, In: J. Sztetyło (ed.) *Nędza czy dostatek na ziemiach polskich od średniowiecza po wiek XX*, Warszawa, 177-181.
- Dąbrowska M. 2004. *Oświetlenie i ogrzewanie średniowiecznych wnętrz zamkowych*, *Archaeologia Historica Polona* 14, 173-188.
- Dembiński P. 2005. *Sobiesiernie*, In: A. Gąsiorowski P. Dembiński, K. Górską-Gołaską, T. Jurerek, G. Rutkowską, I. Skierską, archaeological cooperation A. Łosińską, (eds.) *Słownik historyczno-geograficzny województwa poznańskiego w średniowieczu*, part IV/3 Poznań, 573-575.
- Hensel W., Hilczer-Kurnatowska Z. 1980. *Studia i materiały do osadnictwa Wielkopolski wczesnohistorycznej V*, Wrocław.
- Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce*. 2004. A.S. Labuda, K. Secomska (eds.) 3, Warszawa.
- Marciniak-Kajzer A. 2013. *Jak wyglądały późnośredniowieczne kuchnie?*, *Vox Patrum* 33/59: 449-161.
- Marciniak-Kajzer A. 2019, *Średniowieczna kuchnia „siermiężna” czy „wymyślna”*. *Uwagi o kulturze materialnej*, In: A. Krupa-Ławrynowicz, K. Orszulak-Dutkowska (eds.), *W kuchni. Kulturowe szkice o przestrzeni*, Łódź, 191-205.
- Moszyński K. 1929. *Kultura ludowa Słowian* 1, Kraków.
- Nawroński T. 1990. *Die mittelalterlichen Spiessstützen aus Elbląg*, *Fasciculi Archaeologiae Historicae* 4, 39-46.
- Nowakowski D. 2017. *Śląskie obiekty typu motte. Studium archeologiczno-historyczne*, Wrocław.
- Piekalski J. 2004. *Organizacja wnętrz domów mieszczańskich w Europie Środkowej, w XII-XIII wieku*, *Archaeologia Historica Polona* 14, 29-50.
- Piekalski J. 2004. *Rola archeologii w badaniach początków średniowiecznego domu mieszczańskiego w Europie*, In: B. Gediga (ed.) *Dom w mieście średniowiecznym i nowożytnym*, Wrocław, 51-60.
- Polak Z. 1998. *Zabytki metalowe*, In: M. Rębkowski (ed.) *Archeologia Średniowiecznego Kołobrzegu*, 3, Kołobrzeg, 209-228.
- Rutkowska-Płachcińska A. 1978. *Pożywienie, napoje*, In: A. Rutkowska-Płachcińska (ed.) *Historia kultury materialnej. 2, Od XIII do XV wieku*, Wrocław, 247-279.
- Trawicka E. 2010. *Zabytki metalowe z Wyspy Spichrzów w Gdańsku (badania z 2004 roku)*, In: H. Paner (ed.) *Archeologia Gdańska IV*, Gdańsk, 93-150.

Anna Marciniak-Kajzer  
ORCID 0000-0003-1346-9652  
University of Łódź  
Institute of Archaeology  
anna.kajzer@uni.lodz.pl