Inspiration for this volume came from extensive fieldwork in Asia conducted by us, the editors, as well as discussions about establishing a new course on ‘Rivers and Civilisations’. However, rather than focusing on a course, we thought it would be a good idea to establish a small conference on water-related issues that covered a variety of settings and periods, to see what commonalities might be determined across time. A benefit of archaeology is that it provides a long-term perspective on the use of critical resources such as water. We thought a conference that looked at different cases, applying archaeological methods focused on water, while also inviting noted scholars of current issues relating to water, could provide a longer view of the major issues debated, such as water sustainability, technology and management.

In choosing who to invite to participate, our intention was to incorporate cutting-edge research conducted by various scholars and see how their research addresses the main areas of focus on the topic of water. The main issues we cover are how water relates to societies across time, the technologies of water, and how we can understand water-related issues across time through models (conceptual and quantitative) of water use and management. By the nature of these topics, the scholars’ work had to be interdisciplinary, and often collaborative.

The intention is still to gather momentum for an interdisciplinary teaching initiative on water that aims to provide a coherent overview of how water technologies and societies have co-evolved. The concept of sustainability, we thought, also required investigation, since past and even modern cases have begun to challenge it. A comparative conference could test these ideas and indicate the feasibility of theme-based approaches that are not wedded to disciplines such as archaeology but look at a critical resource across time.

Initial invitations were sent to potential participants, and we received very positive feedback from a variety of scholars in China, the United States, the UK and elsewhere in Europe. This helped us put
forward a strong application for funding, which was ultimately accepted. We are therefore grateful to the Institute of Archaeology and the Institute of Advanced Studies at UCL for their generosity in funding the conference, which was entitled ‘Comparative Water Technologies and Management: Pathways to Social Complexity and Environmental Change’.

This conference proved successful; it focused on the main water-related issues outlined above. Particularly stimulating was the post-presentation group discussion in a seminar room, which not only addressed the achievements of the conference but helped develop the foundations of this volume. We had the opportunity to share, in a relaxed manner, common concerns, our vision – both humble and grand – of future research directions, and anecdotes about fieldwork and interdisciplinary collaborations. Perhaps what was telling was that, outside the building on Gower Street where the conference was held, anti-austerity protestors were marching. We gave sandwiches, which could be considered delicious by UK conference standards, to the upbeat protestors.

Ultimately, we wanted our ideas to be heard and shared more widely, hence this edited open access volume you are reading. We have not made this book simply a proceedings volume. Rather, authors were asked to refine their work to focus on the key takeaway themes that were developed in the conference, so that a larger, more coherent picture could be developed of the long-term use of water and of how different case studies could inform us about how societies have integrated water resources across time.

We thank our contributors for their quick response to emails and for producing their work to a tight production schedule. We are also grateful to UCL Press for making this book happen. In a radically changing publication climate, UCL Press has become a pioneer by making all its publications open access. We are confident that this volume will be a small and stimulating start to a long academic journey that puts water, one of our most critical resources, at the centre of an interdisciplinary and long-term understanding of how this critical resource has been used across time, and the lessons this use has for us today.