“Water has always been and will remain essential to our survival” (p.13). This work on the important subject of water in archaeology is very welcome. Considering the significance of water to life in all periods of the past, as well as the present, it is not an area of study that receives as much attention as it should. The book is divided into a number of themed parts: Part 1 examining the nature and source of water; Part 2 exploring ritual and symbolism; Part 3 addressing early water technology including irrigation systems; Part 4 on the use of water as a power source in technology; Part 5 on wells and pumps; Part 6 examining spas and medicinal uses; Part 7 on water-borne diseases; Part 8, town water supplies; Part 9, sanitation; Part 10, canals of water; Part 11, water towers; Part 12, water in modern Britain; Part 13 on current initiatives on water; and Part 14 providing a conclusion.

The book’s coverage is wide-ranging but there must be some question as to whether it should all be categorised as archaeology and not modern history. Sizable sections are devoted to water provision and laws in nineteenth century Britain whilst there is comparatively little examination of archaeological sites and monuments from across the world, for which there is considerable potential. Although subjects such as aqueducts and bathhouses in the Roman Empire have been examined in great detail elsewhere (e.g. Ashby 1935 The Aqueducts of Ancient Rome, Oxford; Burgers 2001 The Water Supplies and Related Structures of Roman Britain, Oxford, BAR 324), there is little coverage of them here (pp.28-31) compared with British medieval, post-medieval and early modern topics.
Through taking a considerable time span from prehistory to modern times, the book does portray the significance of water within society and how attitudes towards it have changed over time. Understanding these changes helps us to approach in archaeological study the meanings attached to water and its use in the past. In prehistoric, Roman and even later times, for example, rivers, pools, marshland and other watery contexts were foci of veneration through votive offerings and other religious activity (pp.19-26). The increasing economic attitude towards water in the medieval and post-medieval periods (e.g. pp.36-44) served in part to rationalise it, influencing our treatment of water today. Likewise attitudes towards landscape itself have changed. Canal construction, wetland drainage and altering rivers for navigation from the early seventeenth century onwards (pp.140-6) accompanied the industrial changes in Britain and the economic view of land. The alteration of land through water control had as dramatic effects as the Enclosure System. Landscape gardening and ornamental waters also served to rationalise the land and emphasise control (pp.148-50).

London serves as a major case study throughout the book and it does reflect social changes well. It was central in nineteenth century social and scientific investigations into water including work on cholera (pp.84-8), sanitary conditions (pp.98-100) and filtering processes to clean water (pp.97-8). Tributaries of the Thames were lost underground (pp.168-9) and artificial rivers were created, such as Myddleton’s early seventeenth century New River (pp.94-5). The greatest changes came with Bazalgette’s system of sewers, pumping stations and embankments in the second half of the nineteenth century, vividly described and illustrated in the book (pp.115-28). This was a major engineering project and civic event which transformed London and its rivers forever.
The importance attached to water is also reflected in local traditions such as the Palestinian ‘going to the well’ ceremony at weddings (p.49) and ‘well dressing’ on Ascension Day which still survives in parts of England (p.181). These examples are two of probable innumerable customs concerning water in the world and demonstrate the extreme complexity in studying the meaning and treatment of water in the past.

This is an accessible and attractively presented book with important messages about water; it also deals with modern issues such as the bottled water phenomenon (pp.159-60) and water charities (p.178). It does, however, devote considerable space to Britain and the post-medieval period and could have had more variety both in time and space. Most subjects in the book have been addressed in more specialist publications but this is an extremely useful collection of case studies through which the importance of water in studying the past can be observed.
Archaeology is the scientific study of the artifacts or the physical remains of past human cultures. By studying objects that ancient people have made, we can learn more about how they lived and even what they were like. In fact, studying ancient artifacts is the only way to learn anything about human societies that existed long before the invention of writing. Ever since the beginning of civilization and mankind's ability to move over water, the bottoms of nearly all oceans, lakes, and rivers became the final resting place for whatever those vessels were carrying. Henry CHAPMAN, Professor of University of Birmingham, Birmingham | Read 70 publications | Contact Henry CHAPMAN. The archaeology of Catholme and the Trent-Tame confluence. Book. Jan 2009. The unifying nature of water on the preservation of organic archaeological and palaeoenvironmental source material within wet deposits is well recognized. It is also understood that, while the preservation of such deposits is fundamental towards our understanding of the past, in many areas de-watering through agricultural drainage and water abstrac...