The recently increased frequency and severity of disastrous floods experienced in Europe, and other parts of the world, leads to intriguing scientific and practical questions. Is this increase related to better information possibilities? Is the main driving factor human encroachment into flood-prone areas? Is there any global warming trend in flood records? Are the recent violent floods really higher than extreme events from the past, pre-instrumental era? What is the role of land-use changes in watersheds?

Answering these questions needs systematic research which cannot be based just on data from the relatively short period of hydrological measurements starting in the 19th–20th centuries. Significant extension of information about floods from the pre-instrumental period is offered by historical hydrology and palaeohydrology. Historical hydrology, dealing mainly with documentary evidence about hydrological events, offers considerable potential for further hydrological investigations.

Historical hydrology was selected as the theme of this Special Issue of Hydrological Sciences Journal with the aim of defining this new research field and demonstrating its potential in studying hydrological extremes. The geographical coverage of the articles presented includes Spain, Germany, Poland, Austria, the Czech Republic, The Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland.

This Special Issue consists of an Editorial and 14 papers dealing with different research aspects. Abstracts may be seen at http://www.atypon-link.com/IAHS/toc/hysj/51/5.

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- Hydrological winter droughts over the last 450 years in the Upper Rhine basin: a methodological approach Christian Pfister, Rolf Weingartner & Jürg Luterbacher

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