Alexander’s campaign of conquest in the Persian Empire, for those who took part in it, was a continuing education in strategy, and in no place was this more obviously the case than in the conquest of Syria. To everyone who fought at Issos in November 333 it was clear that Syria could be invaded from Asia Minor, as Alexander then did, and from Mesopotamia, as Dareios had; equally, Syria could be a base for invading Mesopotamia, as Alexander did later (and as the Greek army under Cyrus the Younger had done 70 years before). And if one then wanted to attack Egypt, the sieges of Tyre and Gaza made it agonizingly clear that one had to control Syria first; while, conversely, if one had to defend Egypt, the best preparation was to control at least the southern part of Syria. The two-month delay to Alexander’s progress caused by the need to conquer Gaza made the importance of that city all too clear. Again, this had been shown earlier, when the independent pharaohs of the mid-fourth century had held on to Sidon in order to block the Great King’s campaigns aimed at the reconquest of Egypt; only when King Artaxerxes III had taken the city (and destroyed it, as Alexander did Tyre) was he able to approach and invade Egypt. Until Alexander marched back to meet Dareios at Gaugamela, there was much recent Syrian history to help Alexander decide on his movements.

At the same time, it will have become clear that this was a lengthy country, much subdivided by geography and society, and as a result it was very difficult to control. The need to fight and negotiate repeatedly along the march from Issos to Egypt emphasized that it was a country whose population could be recalcitrant. The Persian imperial regime had been only moderately successful in controlling it. The previous regimes, the Babylonians and the Assyrians, had been brutal in their conquests precisely because of Syrian recalcitrance. The Persians had been the relatively benign inheritors of these violent conquerors, taking over a wrecked and ruined land; they had imposed peace but had not done much to promote its recovery. It was also a land which wished to be free of foreign rulers, and during Alexander’s conquest many preferred the light hand of the Persians to that of the Macedonians and Greeks. Its indigenous powers
were few and weak, but they still hankered after independence. Sidon, Tyre, Gaza, Arados, Hierapolis, Samaria, all manifested this wish in various ways between 360 and 330—and there may have been others we do not know about. It was a land difficult to conquer and unlikely to be easy to hold, unless special policies were instituted. Alexander had shown no aptitude for such policies, relying mainly, like the Babylonians and the Assyrians before him, on force and brutality.

The men who accompanied and survived Alexander and his career of conquest had grown up with him at the court of Philip II, most of them learning the way of things as royal pages. There they had lived in a political atmosphere of intrigue, violence, and exhilarating military and diplomatic success. Most of those who were high in his favour when he died at Babylon in June 323 had fought in his battles and had supported him in the several crises of his reign. They could remember his father Philip, whose achievements had in many ways been just as great as Alexander’s, and whose policies and conquests had been the essential bases for Alexander’s own career.

Surviving contemporaries of Philip were, by the time of Alexander’s death, fairly few, for such men had too often fallen foul of Alexander’s political methods, which were as brutal as his military methods. Some had been killed in the fighting, for their lives had been so violent that eventually they were more likely than not to die a violent death. Others had been killed by Alexander for one reason or another, usually on suspicion of plotting against him: so he had killed Parmenion, his father’s right hand man. Others again had been left behind, as he had left Antipater to rule Macedon and control Greece, or Antigonos to hold Asia Minor. Both of these men had performed well with extremely limited resources; and they held themselves superior to most of the Macedonians because of their birth, their age, and their victories.

Alexander’s contemporaries and companions were, of course, much more numerous, though much less so than at the start of his time. They had watched him fight and manoeuvre his way to victory, both on the battlefield and within his court. They had seen him dominate his massed army when it was on the verge of defiant mutiny, and they had seen him defeated—as Alexander would have put it—by that army in the strike staged in India. Their lives since they became adult had been lived in an atmosphere of tension and danger, whether from battle, or from incompletely conquered enemies, or from the intrigues of the moving and unstable royal court; it was a largely male society they inhabited, for few of those with Alexander were married by the time he returned from India.