Any investigation of the relationship between Alexander and the Persians is limited by the imbalance of the literary and archaeological sources. The overwhelming majority of sources which have come down to us were written by Greek and Roman authors, who, with few exceptions, were predominantly in favour of the Macedonian king. Thus, our views of Alexander’s conquest of Persia are shaped and restricted by the way historical events are presented in order to give a favourable depiction of Alexander. The historical viewpoint privileges that of the victor over the conquered, while the Persian perspective can only be glimpsed at through the eyes of the Greeks, never directly be seen in its own light. Other restrictions arise from the limits to the information which Macedonians and Greeks possessed at any time about the Persian empire. Thus, it is doubtful that the Macedonians and Greeks had any in-depth knowledge of the geographical extent and geophysical extremes of the empire, of the careful balance between exercising royal power and accepting the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of the empire’s population, or of the power structures between the king, his relatives, the satraps, and the Persian nobility—issues which were of vital importance for the stability of the empire, and which determined how successfully the empire could be held after a military conquest. To that extent, it can be argued that Alexander failed in his objective to become ‘king of Asia’, since at no point during his conquest Macedonian control over the former Persian empire was absolute.

1 When speaking of ‘Persians’ it must, of course, be understood that we are talking about the Persian ruling class who were members of the royal family or members of the Persian nobility. It was from them that Alexander sought to achieve political recognition, if not acceptance. The term ‘Persians’ cannot comprise the different peoples of the empire who were identified through their ethnic origin, language, customs and religions which the Persians kings left in place for political purposes.
A further problem of the extant historiography is the attempt made by the classical authors to depict Alexander’s opponent, Darius III, as a weak and feeble king, lacking political and military leadership skills. At the same time the figure of the Persian king is used to symbolise a weak and decadent empire at the impending end of its life-cycle. This depiction has little to do with historical reality and more with historiographical considerations which aimed to depict the glory of the conqueror Alexander, as has recently been discussed by Briant (Briant 1996: 715–16; 789–833). This presentation of Darius III provides a paradox in itself, as a fight against a truly weak king would also diminish the extent of Alexander’s victory. The fact that the principal features of the political structure and organisation of the Persian empire were taken over by the Macedonians is proof of the well-functioning state of affairs at the time of Darius III, which should once and for all eradicate the notion of a ‘decadent’ empire (cf. Briant 1996: 895). The Achaemenid empire still functioned with the same satrapal organisation, bureaucratic, financial and military efficiency in the mid-fourth century BC, as it had done at the outset. Taxes and tribute were collected in the satrapal centres and from there taken to the king, while military support would be ensured by the satraps according to royal command. Upheavals in the empire mainly seem to have been connected with succession struggles following the death of Darius II, but they did not shake the fundamental structure of the Achaemenid empire. Achaemenid power continued to be held within the same dynasty for over 230 years. Under Artaxerxes III Egypt was recovered for the empire, while Artashata (cf. Sachs 1977: 143) had gained a reputation for successfully fighting against the Cadusians before he succeeded to the throne as Darius III (Diod. 17.5.6). The image of a decadent empire, which was faced with inevitable decline, is one projected by the Greek historiographers, but does not reflect historical reality. In his

2 For Persia’s battle against the Cadusians see van der Spek 1998: 239–256. Hornblower acknowledges Darius’ courage against the Cadusians, but describes Darius as ‘Alexander’s cowardly opponent’, as the king fleeing from the battlefields of Issus and Gaugamela (Hornblower 1994: 50). Such sentiments ignore the fact that the king as the centre of the army and the empire was the one symbol for which the army remained intact. His death would have meant the total collapse of the army; it was therefore of eminent importance for the continuation of the fight against the Macedonians that the king should stay alive. Diodorus’ description of Darius’ bravery is doubted by Briant 1996: 797.

3 For these views see Kuhrt 1996: 675; Briant 1996: 837–891. For the following see, however, Strauss in this volume.