The analysis of material culture, particularly luxury goods, as a means of determining cultural contact or innovation is essentially an exercise in comparison and classification: the first condition requiring spatial coordinates, the second temporal. In essence, the distinction corresponds to what used to be called ‘diffusion’ vs. ‘independent invention’ in the anthropological literature of the 1950s, until it was realized that both trends exist simultaneously in any dynamic cultural system and must be assessed in terms of degrees of each—internal development and external receptivity—not absolutes of opposition! To pursue such an analytical exercise effectively requires the a priori establishment of ‘boundaries’—between large culture areas such as Egypt and the Levant, for example, between regions, such as Phoenicia and Syria; or between smaller production units within regions, such as distinctive workshops or hands. For, to know whether there has been ‘contact’ between any two entities demands first that one knows that the two entities can be divided one from the other, while to know whether or not there has been ‘innovation’ requires that discrete and definable sets be measured before and after a given datum. Both of these assessments depend upon the identification of appropriate variables for observation, resulting in entities that can either be joined to or divided from one another.

The present paper constitutes a cry for explicit, rigorous, and consciously-applied criteria in arguments related to the establishment of such sets, using the Phoenician and Syrian luxury goods from the

Levant—particularly ivory carving—as the ground from which to then speak about artistic production and cultural contact in the early first millennium B.C.E. These works are the product of archaeological recovery, often found far from their presumed places of manufacture; and part of the problem with our incomplete and less-than-ideal archaeological record is, of course, that often the claimed markers (or artifacts) for establishing distinct groups—stylistic, typological, technological—constitute the only ‘evidence’ we have for those very boundaries, so that we are more prone than is comfortable to circularity of argument (see on this problem, Cowgill 1970). Nevertheless, it is argued that with rigorous analysis, the works can yield significant information about both production and cultural interaction.¹

The study of innovation requires historical depth: the requisite minimum of two measuring points in some temporal sequence permits demonstration of change from a prior state to a new one. Cultural contact can be claimed at a single point in time, but only if characteristic ‘markers’ have first been associated with one discrete cultural entity and then observed to appear in another. Ideally, this phenomenon too must be able to be measured diachronically, establishing first the moments ‘before’ contact and then ‘after’ through the absence/presence of such markers. And, if we are to avoid the circularity noted above, it is useful to draw upon additional, corroborating evidence for historical contact—linguistic, textual, or other artifactual.

Many studies of contact and/or innovation have been undertaken in our field; nevertheless, progress notwithstanding, we have yet to achieve either systematic and rigorous guidelines for adequate observation and the construction of variables, or the means to evaluate the adequacy of criteria used for interpretation. Notably missing is the development of an appropriate scale for measuring the intensity of cultural contact and interaction as distinct from the mere presence/absence of identifiable other-cultural elements (on which, see Winter 2000). An important next step in the development of our analytical tools, therefore, would be to find ways to assess the permeability of boundaries between cultural/historical entities and the nature of interaction/absorption, beyond the

¹ Note, however, the cautions expressed in Lilyquist 1998, concerning the premature use of artifacts, particularly ivory carvings, as evidence for inter-cultural political connections; also in Flood 2001, regarding the frequency of paradox and inconsistency in textual support, and thus the complexity of the historiographic analysis when scholars attempt to contextualize visual culture in terms of broader cultural interaction.