There is a general recognition, common to many disciplines, that cities, regardless of their size, geography, location, era or culture, share many underlying organizational, social and economic characteristics, and play similar functional roles in different human societies. A citizen of New York City will quickly understand how Tokyo works. She will also find a small town anywhere straightforward to navigate, if a little uneventful. When Cortes’ men arrived in Tenochtitlan in 1519 (today’s Mexico City), Bernal Diaz del Castillo famously described the city as spectacular for its size. But perhaps the true surprise should have been—given its independent development from old-world cities—how familiar it all was, in terms of its roads and canals, its public buildings and neighborhood organization and its markets and social life. The same could have been said of countless accounts of travelers, historians and anthropologists. There is a sense in which human settlements of ancient Mesopotamia and of modern developed nations share enough in common that the term “cities” can be used to meaningfully refer to entities separated by thousands of years of cultural, social and technological development. Recent work (empirical and theoretical) on cities and urban systems, informed by the rich research traditions on cities in archaeology and anthropology, suggests that the functional role of cities in human societies, as well as some of the general aspects of their internal organization, may be universal: they may be expected to develop in urban systems that arose and evolved independently and hold across time, culture and level of technology. Cities, from this perspective, are elaborations on a theme. In this talk José Lobo will discuss recent work on scaling phenomena exhibited by contemporary cities, including empirical studies and theoretical work to explain scaling patterns. Michael Smith will then describe his attempts to apply scaling methods to ancient cities. Both presenters will explore the major similarities and differences between early cities and contemporary cities.

Michael E. Smith is an archaeologist in SHESC at ASU. He directs excavations of house remains at Aztec sites in Mexico to study households, communities, and cities and their changes through time. He also works on comparative urbanism, particularly urban life and social organization. He co-directs a transdisciplinary research project at ASU on equity of access to urban services in premodern cities.

José Lobo is a Research Faculty at the School of Sustainability. Trained in physics and economics, he has been studying cities from the analytical perspective of complexity science.

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