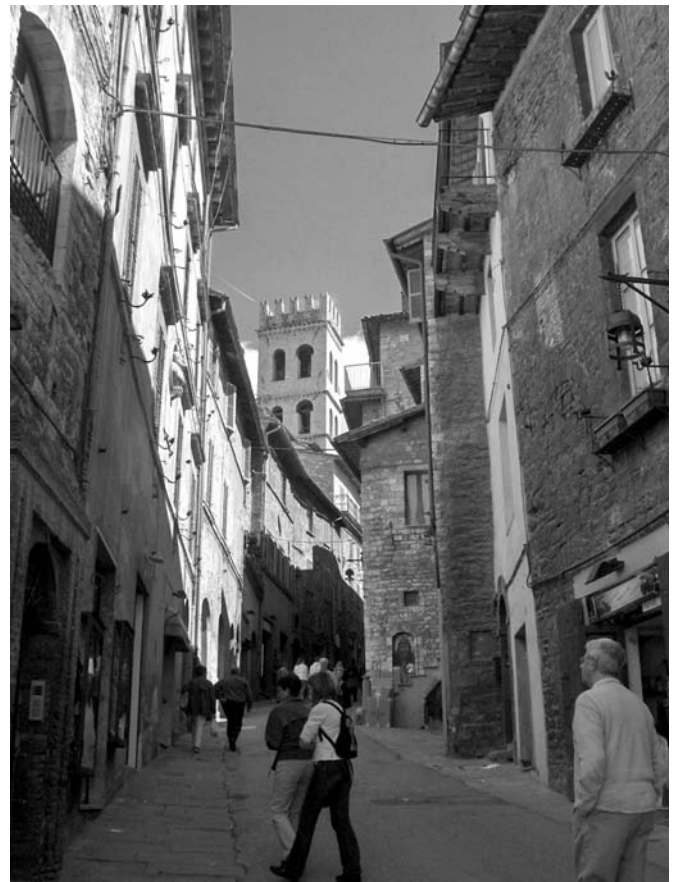**2.2** The Agora in Athens

2.3 The Imperial Forum in Rome

2.4 Medieval winding street in Assisi

spaces, shopping spaces and spiritual spaces, very similar to Western cities today. The Romans also understood the semiotic qualities of public space. Examples of this are the strong symbolism of state and religion in Roman piazzas, where surrounding buildings contained the senate and temple, accompanied by monuments and statues. This is a tradition that has continued in towns and cities through to today.

Imperial Rome used this method to impress an image on its population (Figure 2.3). While the Greeks recognised that the aesthetic qualities of space could beautify the soul and exalt the mind, Imperial Rome recognised that the design of space could have controlling influences on the population, and imperial and totalitarian regimes throughout history have used this principle.

The middle ages onwards

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, city life declined in Western Europe. The church became powerful with the decline of the state, and expanded its influence within the walled cities the Romans had left behind. The walls of the settlements that protected against marauding tribes constricted the development of the settlements (Pirenne 2000: 39–41), and as the settlements declined, so consequently did urban public space. However, Mumford (1961: 255) stresses that these small settlements continued to contain commercial activity through the dark ages, and when international trade routes reopened, urban growth was accelerated.

Medieval public space was framed and often controlled by the church. Often the only planned public space was in front of the church to accommodate the congregation entering and leaving, with markets often sharing the same space, and operating on a weekly cycle. The church was the centre of the settlement and public life, with religious festivals, pilgrimages and processions used to bring the community together. Growth became organic and ad hoc with an emphasis on defence. Webb (1990: 40–1), for example, describes medieval streets as utilitarian, and it was only latterly as towns prospered that streets and spaces could be beautified. This also created public spaces that were independent of the church but still within the narrow confines of the town wall.

Despite the lack of formal design, the results often had their own innate qualities. Alberti and Sitte both admired the medieval winding street as an aesthetic, producing unpredictability and excitement for users walking through the city (Figure 2.4), as opposed to the rigidity of the gridiron (Mumford 1961: 261–314). Furthermore the medieval city was a more egalitarian place than its ancient predecessors. 'The medieval town had succeeded as no previous urban culture had done. For the first time the majority of inhabitants were free men… city dweller and citizen were synonymous terms' (Mumford 1961: 316), and this was reflected in the unrestricted use of public space. The street systems that developed were organic, commercial, and vibrant public spaces.