

CHAPTER XVI

THE COMITIUM

THE last building on the east side of the Forum, south of Abbondanza Street, had undergone a complete transformation a short time before the destruction of the city. Before the rebuilding, a row of pillars separated the interior of the structure from the Forum and from the street. At the edge of the sidewalk along the latter are square holes opposite the pillars (shown on the plan, Fig. 51), evidently designed for the insertion of posts, so that a temporary barrier of some sort could be set up. The end of the space within the barrier where this came to the Forum, and of the rest of the street as well, could be shut off by latticed gates.

If the barrier were set up, and the latticed gate at the Forum end left open, the building and the space within the barrier would be shut off from Abbondanza Street, but closely connected with the Forum by the numerous entrances. After the rebuilding only two entrances from the Forum were left, and one from Abbondanza Street.

It is altogether unlikely that so large a building, of irregular shape and with pillars on two sides, was provided with a roof; we have here an open space rather, serving as an extension of the Forum. The walls were covered with marble and adorned with niches, in which, without doubt, statues were placed. On the south side is a large recess the floor of which, reached by a flight of steps, forms a kind of platform or tribune about four feet above the pavement of the enclosure (1). A small door at



Fig. 51.— Plan of the Comitium.

1. Recess opening on the main room.
2. Recess opening on the Forum.

the right leads into a narrow room containing a similar platform opening on the colonnade of the Forum (2), and to all appearances once accessible from it by steps; afterwards both the steps and the tribune were walled up.

The purpose of these tribunes, and of the building as a whole, is far from clear. An analogy, however, suggests itself. On one side of the Roman Forum near the upper end was a small rectangular open space called the Comitium, used in early times as a voting place. Between the Forum and the Comitium was originally a speaker's platform, the Rostra, so placed that orators by turning toward one side could address an audience in the Comitium and facing about could harangue the Forum. Though the later changes have obscured the original form of our building, yet it is plain that at one time there must have been two connected tribunes, one facing the Forum, the other the enclosed open space; we may at least hazard the conjecture that the colonists of Sulla, taking the arrangements of the capital as their pattern in all things, designed this place as their Comitium.

The enclosure was too small to admit of its use for voting according to the ancient fashion, but general elections in the Comitium had long been a thing of the past; only the unimportant curiate elections were held there, at which each curia was represented by a lictor, and at other times the place was used for judicial proceedings. So our building was probably used, if not for elections, for formalities preliminary to the elections and for business connected with the courts.