CHAPTER XVII

THE MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS

At the south end of the Forum were three buildings similar in plan and closely connected. In front they presented a common façade, the narrow spaces between them being entered by low doors. The building at the right (Fig. 52, 3) was at the corner of the Forum, while the space separating the other two lay on a line dividing the Forum into two equal parts; east of the last building is the Strada delle Scuole.

The three buildings were erected after the earthquake of 63, on the site of older buildings of the same character. In the walls of that furthest east (1), considerable remains of the earlier walls are embodied; in that near the corner the original pavement is preserved, and in the middle building there are traces of the original pavement. Previous to this rebuilding the inner series of columns belonging to the colonnade about the Forum had in part been removed and a barrier set up, by which the space in front of the middle building and that at the left could be shut off (indicated on the plan by broken lines). At the time of the eruption only the building at the left (1) was entirely finished. The others still lacked their decoration on both inner and outer walls.

These three spacious halls must have served the purposes of the city administration. The two at the right and the left are alike in having at the end opposite the entrance an apse large enough to accommodate one or more magistrates with their attendants; they were the official quarters of the aediles and the duumvirs, while the middle hall was the council chamber, curia, where the decurions met.
The middle room was obviously intended to be the most richly ornamented of the three, and was further distinguished from the others by the elevation of its floor, which was more than two feet above the pavement of the colonnade. In front of the entrance is a platform reached at either end by an approach hardly wide enough for two persons, thus suited for a select rather than a large attendance.

Along the sides within runs a ledge a little more than five feet above the floor, on which rested a double series of columns, one above the other, serving both as ornament and as a support for a ceiling like that of the temple of Jupiter.

If we picture to ourselves the columns in place, the walls covered with marble, and a rich coffered ceiling above, we are led to form a favorable idea of the recuperative powers of the city which set about the construction of such costly and splendid buildings so soon after the terrible earthquake.

The recess at the rear was designed for a large shrine patterned after the small shrines of the Lares and Penates in private houses. The Penates of the city were above all the emperor and his family. If this shrine had been finished, figures representing Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian would probably have been placed in it, facing the three Capitoline divinities in the temple of Jupiter at the other end of the Forum.

The office of the aediles, situated at the corner of the colonnade and close to the Basilica, and with no barrier to prevent ready access, was particularly convenient for magistrates who, among other duties, were charged with the maintenance of order and the enforcement of regulations in the markets. One or perhaps both aediles sat in the apse; while the rear and middle parts of the room were reserved for those who had business with them. The front part, lower than the rest by two steps (shown on the plan), may have served as a waiting room. At the rear of the apse and in the walls at the sides were niches for the statues of members of the imperial family and of those who had rendered important services to the city.

As the duumvirs not only sat as judges but also had in their hands the financial administration of the city, we can see why the hall set aside for their use was the first to be rebuilt after the earthquake. The magistrates, of course, sat in the apse, along the wall of which was a ledge for statues. The strong front doors were fastened with iron bolts, and there was also a latticed gate on the step in front of the threshold; probably the archives of the duumviral office were kept within. The small side door at the right made it possible to enter and leave the building after business hours or at other times when the large doors were closed.