CHAPTER IX

THE BASILICA

The Basilica, at the southwest corner of the Forum, was the most magnificent and architecturally the most interesting building at Pompeii. Its construction and decoration point to the pre-Roman time; and there is also an inscription scratched on the stucco of the wall, dating from almost the beginning of the Roman colony: C. Pumidius Dipilus heic fuit a. d. v. nonas Octobris M. Lepid. Q. Catul. cos., — 'C. Pumidius Dipilus was here on the fifth day before the nones of October in the consulship of Marcus Lepidus and Quintus Catulus,' that is October 3, 78 B.C.

The purpose of the building is clearly indicated not only by its plan and the details of its arrangement but also by the word Basilica scratched a number of times by idlers on the stucco of the outer wall at the right of the south entrance. This sure identification lends to the edifice a special significance; it is without doubt the oldest example that we have of an important architectural type whose origin is lost in obscurity, but of which the derivative forms may still be recognized in the architecture of to-day. What the temple developed by the Greeks was to pagan antiquity, that the basilica became to the Christian Church — a type dominating a system of religious architecture. Pagan worship was individual,—a narrow chamber sufficed for the image of the god and the requirements of religious service; but Christian worship was social, and its functions demanded a larger room, in which a congregation could be assembled. The religious architecture of the Church therefore broke with the religious architecture of pagan antiquity, and turned for its model to the basilica.

Our knowledge of the history of the basilica begins with the erection of the Basilica Porcia in Rome by Cato the Elder, in
184 B.C.; other basilicas followed, and in Caesar’s day a number stood about the Forum. Regarding its development prior to the time of Cato only conjectures can be offered. The name basilica (basilike stoa, ‘the royal hall’) points to a Greek origin; we should naturally look for the prototype of the Roman as well as the Pompeian structure in the capitals of the Alexandrian period and in the Greek colonies of Italy. But no ruin, no reference in literature comes to our aid. The supposition that the King’s Hall (basileios stoa) in Athens, the official residence of the King Archon, was the prototype of all basilicas, has little to support it; our information in regard to the form of this building is quite inadequate, and the name alone warrants no positive conclusion. It is more probable that both the name and the architectural type came from the ‘royal hall’ of one of the successors of Alexander.

A basilica was a spacious hall which served as an extension of a market place, and was itself in a certain sense a covered market. It was not limited to a specific purpose; in general, whatever took place on the market square might take place in the basilica, the roof of which afforded protection against the weather. It was chiefly devoted, however, to business transactions and to the administration of justice. The form is known partly from the remains of the basilicas in Rome—Basilica Julia, Basilica Ulpia, the Basilica of Constantine—and in Africa, but more fully from the treatise of Vitruvius and the description of a basilica which he himself erected at Fano.

According to these sources the plan of a typical basilica is essentially that of the building before us (Fig. 23). An oblong space is divided by columns into a broad central hall and a corridor which runs around the four sides. The height of the columns, in the typical basilica, is equal to the width of the corridor, which is covered by a flat roof; the inner edge of this roof is carried by the entablature above the columns. The main room is
higher than the corridor. Above the entablature is a low wall on which there is a second row of columns; these carry the main roof and form a clerestory, the light being admitted through the intercolumniations.

The main hall and the corridor were devoted to trade; the dealers perhaps occupied the former, while in the latter the throng of purchasers and idlers moved freely about. The place set aside for the administration of justice, the tribunal, was ordinarily an apse projecting from the rear end. In our Basilica, however,—and in some others as well,—it was a small oblong elevated room back of the central hall, toward which it opened in its whole length.

This ideal plan would answer very well for that of the early Christian basilicas, excepting in one respect; instead of a corridor on all four sides they have only aisles parallel with the nave, an arrangement which had already been adopted in some basilicas designed for markets. The Christian basilicas would give us a still truer idea of the arrangement and lighting of the pagan prototype if in most cases a part of the numerous windows had not been walled up, thus producing a dimness in keeping with a religious but not a secular edifice.

In pagan structures the ideal plan was by no means strictly followed. Vitruvius himself at Pano, and the architects of other basilicas the remains of which have been discovered, did not hesitate to depart from it. So the Basilica at Pompeii, as we shall see, presents a modification of the general plan in an important particular, the admission of light; and this deviation was carried out with finer artistic feeling than was displayed by Vitruvius in his building.

Our Basilica is undoubtedly of later date than the Basilica Porcia, but the Pompeians, who at the time when it was built were pupils of the Greeks in matters of art, found their model not in Rome but in a Greek city, perhaps Naples.

Five entrances, separated by tufa pillars, lead from the colonnade of the Forum into the east end of the basilica. First comes a narrow entrance court (a), extending across the entire building and open to the sky. On the walls, as also on the outside of the building, are remains of a simple stucco decoration; below, a yellow base with a projecting red border along the upper edge; above, a plain white surface. At the left outside the entrance court is a cistern for rain water collected from the roof; the stairway close by (shown on the plan) had nothing to do with the Basilica, but was connected with the upper gallery of the colonnade about the Forum.

Mounting four steps of basalt we pass from the narrow court into the building. The five entrances here are separated by four columns. Those next to the two sides on the right and on the left were closed by a wall in which was a wide doorway; the three at the middle were left as open intercolumniations. The enclosed space before us measures 180 ½ English feet (200 Oscan feet) in length, 78 ¾ feet in breadth. Twenty-eight massive brick columns, 4 Oscan feet in diameter, separate the great central hall from the broad corridor running about it; only the lower part of the columns, built of small bricks evidently made specially for this purpose, is preserved (Fig. 24). Attached half-columns, with a diameter a little more than three fourths that of the others, project from the walls; the wall decoration, which imitates in stucco a veneering of colored marbles, is of the first style (p. 41). The columns of the entrance and
those at the rear have the same diameter as the half-columns; part of the Ionic capitals belonging to them have been found, but the capitals of the large columns have wholly disappeared.

There are only scanty remains of the floor, which consisted of bits of brick and tile mixed with fine mortar and pounded down \textit{(opus signinum)}; it extended in a single level over the whole enclosed space, and from this level our estimates of height are reckoned. On three sides of the main hall near the base of the columns under the floor is a square water channel, indicated on our plan; eight rectangular basins lie along its course, but the purpose of it is not clear. The tribunal projects from the rear wall, its floor being six Oscan feet above that of the rest of the building.

The large columns about the main hall, with a diameter of more than \(3\frac{1}{2}\) feet, must have been at least 32 or 33 feet high; the attached half-columns with the columns at the entrance and at the rear, including the Ionic capitals, were probably not more than 20 feet high. But assuming that the roof of the corridor was flat, the walls must have been as high as the entablature of the large columns, and so must have extended above the entablature of the half-columns; considerable portions of this upper division of the walls remain.

Along the walls on the ground are to be seen a number of capitals, fragments of shafts and bases belonging to a series of smaller columns with a diameter of 1.74 feet, all found in the course of the excavations. They are of tufa, coated with white stucco; they can belong only here, and by the study of their forms—columns, half-columns, and peculiarly shaped three-quarter-columns—the upper division of the walls can be restored with some degree of certainty. Not to go into technical details, in the upper part of the side walls a section of wall containing a window alternated with a short series of columns in which the columns, for the sake of greater solidity, were set twice as close as the half-columns in the lower division of the wall, the intercolumniations being left entirely open (Fig. 25); over the entrances at the front the wall was continuous but was divided into sections by half-columns corresponding with the columns below, a window being placed between every two half-columns in order to conceal the difference in width between the sections of wall at the front and those at the sides. The arrangement was similar at the rear, on either side of the tribunal, as may be seen from the section (Fig. 27).

With this restoration of the outer walls completed we are able to form a clear idea of the appearance of the main hall. Whether or not the rafters could be seen from below is uncertain, but the probability is that, as assumed in our restoration (Fig. 26), they were hidden by a coffered ceiling. The simple and beautiful interior abounded in fine spatial effects. The corridor and main room were almost as high as the main room was wide, that is between 35 and 40 feet. The light streaming in through the openings in the upper portion of the walls was evenly distributed throughout the hall; we may assume that when the sun became too hot on the south side it could be shut out by curtains.

In our Basilica, then, we notice a wide divergence from the ideal or normal plan. Instead of a clerestory above the main hall a proportionally greater height is given to the corridor. The normal height of a basilica corridor is represented by the
lower division of the walls with the attached half-columns and their entablature; this, however, is here treated simply as a lower member, and upon it, rather than upon the entablature of the columns about the main hall, was placed an upper division of wall admitting light and air through intercolumniations and windows.

The tribunal at the rear is the most prominent and architecturally the most effective portion of the building. The base is treated in a bold, simple manner; upon it, at the front, stands a row of columns the lower portions of which show traces of latticework. The decoration of the walls, like that of the rest of the interior, imitates a veneering of colored marbles. The shape and comparatively narrow dimensions of the elevated room indicate that we have here a tribunal in the strict sense, a raised platform for the judge and his assistants; in the basilicas provided with apses the latter were large enough to make room both for the judicial body and for the litigants. Here the litigants stood on the floor in front of the tribunal, and when court was in session the general public must have been excluded from this part of the corridor. The arrangement in this respect was far from convenient, but seemingly convenience was sacrificed to aesthetic considerations; the builders wished to treat the projecting front of the tribunal as an ornament to the building.

Under the tribunal was a vaulted chamber half below the level of the ground; two round holes, indicated on the plan, opened into it from above. It could hardly have been designed as a place for the confinement of prisoners; escape would have been easy by means of two windows in the rear, especially when help was rendered from the outside. More likely it was used, in connection with the business of the court, as a storeroom, in which writing materials and the like, or even documents, might be kept; they could easily have been passed up through the holes when needed. The second story of the tribunal was not as completely open to the main hall as the first. Its front, the remains of which have for the most part been recovered, was divided off by half-columns corresponding in number and arrangement with the columns of the first story, but each half-column was flanked by narrow pilasters, while a parapet of moderate height occupied the intervening spaces. It was built apparently with a view to architectural effect rather than practical use (Fig. 27).

At the right and the left of the tribunal are places for stairways. Each of these contains a landing on the same level with the floor of the tribunal, from which it was cut off by a door; the steps connecting with these landings, being of wood, have disappeared. In both stair rooms, however, flights of stone steps lead down to the vaulted chamber below, so that this could not have been accessible if there were wooden steps on both sides connecting the tribunal with the floor of the Basilica. Probably on one side the wooden steps led from the tribunal
down to the floor, but on the other ascended from the corresponding landing to the second story, thus leaving the stairway to the lower room unobstructed on that side. At some later time the door at the left between the tribunal and the landing was walled up, perhaps because the gallery was no longer used; if still in use it could to all appearances have been reached only by a ladder.

The two open rooms at the rear on either side of the tribunal agree in their decoration with the entrance court except that the base with its border is higher, and the white surface above is moulded in stucco so as to give the appearance of slabs of white marble. They were no higher than the first division of the wall; the windows seen in Fig. 27 above the broad entrances opened into the outer air. Perhaps they were used as waiting rooms for litigants.

Opposite the north entrance between two columns stood a curb like those over the mouths of cisterns; only the foundation stone with a circular opening is preserved. The remains of a lead pipe, which brought the water to it, show that it must have been connected with an aqueduct. At the further end of the main hall was an equestrian statue of which no trace has been found.

The arrangement of the roof is a problem of much difficulty. Without wearying the reader by presenting various possibilities, it will be sufficient for our purposes to suggest the explanation which, on the whole, has the most in its favor. As assumed in our restoration, the roof of the main hall was carried by the entablature of the twenty-eight large columns. Thus in general the arrangement corresponded fairly well with that of other basilicas except that, owing to the lack of a clerestory, the roof of the main hall was not much if any higher than that of the corridor. From the flat roof of the corridor, at least on the south side, the rain water flowed into the cistern near the front part of the building.

The five entrances opening from the Forum into the narrow court could be closed by latticed doors. Similar doors hung also on the wooden jambs of the north and south entrances. With such doors a complete safeguarding could not have been contemplated. Tradespeople using the Basilica must either have removed their wares at the close of business hours or have made the stalls sufficiently secure for protection. We can hardly doubt that ordinarily a night watchman was on duty about the building.