How did the geography of the Italian peninsula affect where and how people settled and lived?

Italy is a rocky, mountainous peninsula 600 miles long and 150 miles wide. The **Apennine Mountains** form its “backbone” and stretch from north to south, with the **Tiber River** cutting through them in central Italy. Along the northern border, the **Alps** serve as a natural boundary. The three major bodies of water surrounding Italy are the **Adriatic Sea**, the **Ionian Sea**, and the **Mediterranean Sea**. Romans developed many trade routes to other regions in the Mediterranean region. Greece is only 50 miles away, across the Adriatic Sea, and Africa is only 100 miles from the west coast of **Sicily**.

Along the western coast of Italy, at the base of the Apennine mountain range, lie three plains areas where most early people settled. **Rome** was a bustling city near the Tiber River and the seacoast and the hub of the Roman Empire’s trade business.
What did the early settlers look for when deciding where to build their cities, and how did the site chosen for Rome fit these criteria?

**Fresh Water** - fresh water is essential for all life - people, animals, and crops. Rivers also provide a means for trade and transportation.

**Sea Access** - ports are necessary to safely harbor the ships used for trade and military expansion into other lands.

**Good Land** - for a city to flourish, it must be out of flood range and have land good for farming, grazing, and hunting.

**Protection** - the site chosen for a major city must offer protection from invaders by land or by sea. It must also provide room for growth and expansion.

Rome was built 15 miles inland on the crest of seven hills covered with forests of oak and chestnut. Small streams ran through the valleys, and flanking the seven hills was the large Tiber River, whose steep banks served as additional natural protection. The Mediterranean climate of hot, dry summers and wet, mild, winters proved ideal for people, plants, and animals. The rich volcanic soil was perfect for raising crops.

From Rome’s vantage point the Roman Empire began and grew. Many large cities were established, but most of the people lived in farming communities and worked the land. These communities consisted of small villages, farmsteads, and hamlets. Farm workers produced the food, materials, and fuel that the large cities needed. It was a difficult life full of endless work for men, women, and children.

The very rich in Ancient Rome owned vast estates of fertile farmland. Here they built magnificent villas to which they would flee to escape the heat and congestion of the cities where they conducted their business. The estates were cared for by slaves, whose lives were grudgingly hard and far removed from the peaceful and luxurious country life their owners enjoyed.
On farmland near the warm shores of the Mediterranean Sea farmers grew many grains, such as emmer wheat, which was made into bread and used in other foods. But as the Roman Empire grew, it could not feed all of its people alone, so wheat and other grains were imported from Egypt and other areas in northern Africa.

The most prized crops were grapes and olives, both of which grew well in the rocky soil and warm climate. Grapes were fermented and made into wine. There were few other beverages available, so wine was widely consumed throughout the Mediterranean region and was therefore a valuable trade commodity. Olives were grown to be eaten and also to be processed for their oil. Olive oil became a basic essential for Mediterranean cooking. It was also used as fuel in lamps and for cleaning the body.

Large ranches with pigs, cattle, goats, and sheep were able to thrive in regions unsuitable for planting. Large cattle ranges provided meat, leather goods, and dairy products. Goats and sheep produced milk, cheese, meat, and the wool used for clothing. Hunting wild animals such as boar and deer was a favorite, though dangerous, sport for many Romans. In addition to offering good hunting, the forests were valuable for their wood for building and for fuel. Fish and waterfowl were plentiful. In short, because of Italy's natural resources - and its hard-working people - the Ancient Romans were able to establish and maintain a far-reaching civilization that lasted nearly 2,000 years.