The Renaissance began in northern and central Italy. One reason why it began there was the prosperity of Italian city-states [city-states: an independent state consisting of a city and its surrounding territory].

In the Late Middle Ages, most of western Europe was made up of fiefs ruled by nobles. Above the nobles were monarchs. In Italy, however, growing towns developed into independent city-states. Each city-state consisted of a powerful city and the surrounding territory [territory: a specific area of land], which might include other towns.

The Italian city-states conducted their own trade, collected their own taxes, and made their own laws. Some, such as Florence, were republics [republics: a form of government in which citizens elect representatives to rule for them] that were governed by elected councils.

In theory, the power in republics belonged to the people. In fact, it often lay in the hands of rich merchants. During the Middle Ages, guilds of craftspeople and merchants became very powerful. During the Renaissance, groups of guild members, called boards, often ruled Italian city-states. Boards were supposed to change members frequently. However, wealthy families often gained long-term control. As a result, some city-states were ruled by a single rich family, such as the Medici (MED-uh-chee) family in Florence.
Trade made the Italian city-states dazzlingly wealthy. Italy’s central Mediterranean location in the middle of the trade routes connected distant places with the rest of western Europe. People from all over Europe came to northern Italy to buy, sell, and do their banking.

Some Italian city-states developed specializations. Florence became a center for cloth making and banking. Milan produced metal goods and armor. The port city of Genoa was a trade center for ivory and gold from northern Africa. Venice, the most powerful city-state, had hundreds of ships that controlled the trade routes in the Mediterranean Sea. Silk, spices, and perfume from Asia flowed into Venice.

The city-states’ wealth encouraged a boom in art and learning. Rich families paid for the creation of statues, paintings, beautiful buildings, and elegant avenues. They built new centers of learning, such as universities and hospitals. From the city-states of Italy, Renaissance ideas spread to the rest of Europe.