

Public Space in Island Communities

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Pre-Diploma Research

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Nobody can leave an island. An island is a cosmos in a nutshell, where the stars slumber in the grass beneath the snow.

- From the novel *The Unseen* by Roy Jacobsen

Introduction

This pre-diploma research is about island communities and public space. It is also an introduction on island communities in Norway. My interest in public space, or should I say *social space*, on islands comes from my own upbringing on a small island in Northern Norway. Daily activities, small events and big celebrations often take place in the same limited number of social spaces, and more than anything they are manifestations of an island's vitality or death. These communities are changing rapidly, and in the future there might be different demands as to what programs they need to uphold in order to stay viable. My aim with this report is to analyse some island communities and propose a site and an architectural program that can be a part of the development of the island community of tomorrow.

An island is a world of its own with clear boundaries that separates it from the rest of the world. This makes islands fundamentally different from mainland communities. It is water that defines an island, and this is not only a boundary and a barrier, but also a means of communication. Venetians know all about this. The city has practically no streets that are fit for car traffic, but a well developed network of canals that bring people and goods around the city. Venice reminds us that an island could in fact be a great city, but it could also be a mysterious dot on the map where no human has found it fit to survive, such as the Bouvet Island in the South Atlantic. People have settled on islands for different reasons, but in the contemporary society there are probably not as many reasons to inhabit islands as it used to be. Venice was built on islands as a means of protection. Today there is a bridge connecting it to the mainland where most of the population live, and the water that once was protecting the city is about to devour it. The island of Træna in Northern Norway has been populated ever since the ice started to retract at the end of the last ice age. The short distance to the fishing grounds has made it sensible to live here up until modern days, but modern fisheries are not as related to place as it used to be and cannot uphold an entire community; the population needs to find other reasons to stay.

As modern technology has made it easier to connect islands physically to the mainland, the number of populated detached islands are decreasing. In Norway there has been a general trend of decreasing populations on these islands and many have been abandoned, especially in the post-war period. The islands that still have vital communities are especially vulnerable of cuts in public services and transport, and with an aging population, the future of many of these communities are uncertain. The question of why people choose to live in these kinds of communities is difficult to answer, but the reality is that they exist, and I would argue that this is a good enough reason for architects to pay attention to them.



Venice, Italy.



Træna, Norway.

Island Communities in Norway

There are about 240 000 islands in Norway,¹ and they make up a belt along the coast which has been populated for more than 10 000 years.² More than 500 000 people live on the Norwegian islands, many of them in and around big cities such as Tromsø, Ålesund, Bergen, Haugesund and Tønsberg. Most of the big islands are connected to the mainland with bridges and tunnels, but there are numerous island communities that still are separated from the Norwegian mainland, and these are the subject of my research.

The term "island community" in this context does not include every inhabited island in Norway. First of all it can not be connected with the mainland. This excludes the biggest and most populous islands, like Hinnøya, Tromsøya and Karmøy. An island community could be a single island, but in most cases an island community consists of several islands connected to each other in such a way that they form a wider community. It could be a pure island municipality such as Træna which is self sufficient in terms of basic public services, or it could be part of a mainland municipality such as the islands in Kragerø which have a few public services, but are completely dependant on the center on the mainland.

In the map on the next page I have attempted to identify all of the island communities in Norway and I have divided them into three categories;

1. Island Networks

A group of islands connected to each other and/or the mainland in such a way that they together uphold all the basic functions for a community such as schools, kindergartens, care homes, grocery stores etc. Public transport is organised in such a way that daily commute by boat is possible, such as the archipelago Væran in the City of Bodø.

2. Big Islands

Islands or archipelagos that are so big that there can exist multiple independent communities on the same island, and where internal road connections are just as important as ferry connections. These communities can consist of only one island, such as Vega, or several smaller islands connected with bridges such as Austevoll.

3. Single Islands

Islands with one single community and not part of a wider island network. Examples of single island communities are Værøy, Røst and Utsira, which also are independent municipalities.

The classification is based on my own research; I have used maps, publicly available information from municipalities and transport authorities, and my own experience to classify the different island communities. There might be some debatable conclusions, but I think the overview in general depicts the situation fairly correct.



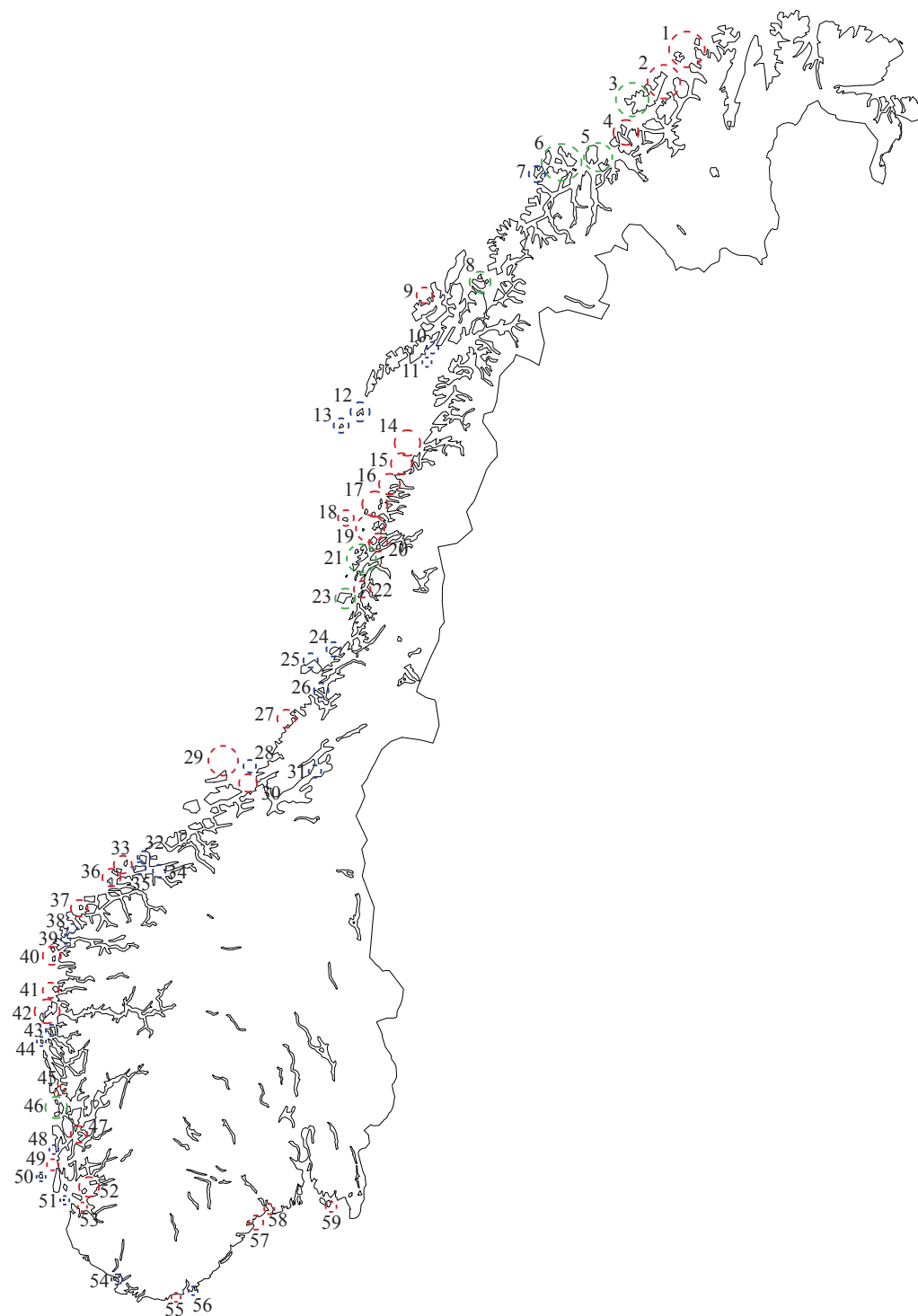
The city of Tromsø with its center on Tromsøya.



The abandoned island Grip outside Kristiansund.

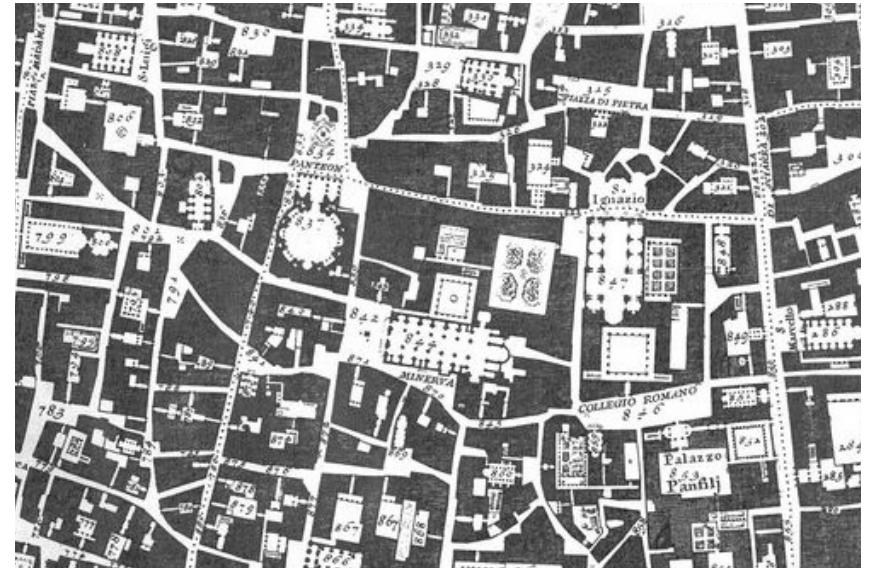
1. Måsøy
2. Sørøya Østre
3. Sørøya Vestre
4. Loppa
5. Skjervøy
- 6. Karlsøy**
7. Vengsøy
8. Bjarkøy/Grytøy
9. Øksnes Vestbygd
10. Stormolla
11. Skrova
12. Værøy
13. Røst
14. Væran
15. Ytre Gildeskål
16. Meløyene
- 17. Rødøyene**
18. Træna
19. Lurøyene
20. Nesnaøyene
21. Herøy/Dønna
22. Vevelstad
23. Vega
24. Leka
25. Borgan
26. Jøa
27. Osenfjord
28. Tarva
29. Frøya
30. Ytre Trondheimsfjord

31. Ytterøya
32. Gossa
33. Sandøy
34. Sekken
35. Midsund
36. Haram
37. Sande
38. Barmen
39. Husevågøy
40. Florø
41. Askvoll
42. Solund
43. Gulen
44. Fedje
45. Raunefjorden
46. Austevoll
47. Klosterfjorden
48. Espevær
49. Røvær/Føyeno
50. Utsira
51. Kvitsøy
52. Ryfylke
53. Byøyene i Stavanger
54. Herdla
55. Skjærgården i Søgne
56. Randesund
- 57. Skjærgården i Kragerø**
58. Langesundfjorden
59. Østre Hvaler



Public Space

One definition of public space is "a place that is generally open and accessible to people".³ Commonly this includes roads, sidewalks, public squares, parks and beaches. The Italian architect and surveyor Giambattista Nolli included the interior of churches and other public buildings as public space in his map of Rome from 1748. In cities the most conventional way of defining public space is with the absence of buildings. In more sparsely populated areas absence of buildings describe nothing more than the landscape, which of course should be considered public space, but the public sphere where people meet is more often defined by built structures that separates people from the never ending landscape, such as churches, schools, the quay where people come and leave, community buildings etc. Due to small populations these public spaces are not used all of the time, but some rituals or rhythms decide when they are functioning as public meeting places. Local shops are in some communities the most important public meeting place, and the opening hours define a frame for these meetings. The quay is maybe the most extroverted space on an island. Some people never set their foot on an island, but still feel a relation to it from traveling by its quay. In the following chapter I will try to identify public spaces that appear in island communities, describe their function and role in an island community.



Section of the Nolli map.



Arrival of the local route at Gjerøy.

School

Not all islands have schools, but it is the building that more than anything symbolises an island's future. On my island, Selsøyvik, there was a school as long as there were still children. When the school closed, this was seen as the beginning of the end for the island. Who would want to move to an island without a school? Island schools are often small and many of them contain multiple functions, such as Helligvær School which also has a kindergarten and a community space. Many islanders have to travel by boat to get to school. This is the case for the children at Reinøya in Troms, even though the island has more than 200 inhabitants. The ferry ride to the school at Hansnes is manageable, but for the 30 inhabitants at Sørburøy in Frøya, the long distance over open waters is probably a good reason why the school, with only eight pupils, are still running.



Helligvær School, Væran.



Sørburøy School, Frøya.

Church

Traditionally the church has been one of the most important places to gather for islanders.⁴ It is still an important venue for cultural and religious events in many communities; it offers something that may not exist anywhere else in the community, namely a large indoor space. The island churches are story tellers. The main church in Meløy Municipality is placed at Meløy island, but only 187 of the 6346 inhabitants in the municipality live on the island.⁵ The church can fit 750 people, it is actually one of the biggest churches in Nordland County, and when the church was built 1867 this was the most central site in the parish. Everyone could easily reach it by boat which was the main means of transportation. Today most of the population live on the mainland where all the communities are connected by tunnels and bridges. Main churches doesn't exist on every island, but there is a large number of other houses of worship, often called "bedehus", scattered around in most island communities. Their role is often more informal, many of them run by local mission societies. They too are important meeting places, especially on islands that have no schools or community buildings.



Meløy Church, Meløyene.



Nordeide Bedehus, Karlsøy.

Community House

Most communities in Norway have some sort of community house. They serve as venues for celebrations (private and public) and other events during the year, but are usually not used on a weekly basis. Some places they share a space with the local school. Often there are local societies that run them, like a fishermen's society, and many of them were built as a result of a voluntary effort. Older buildings often contain a main space with a normal height ceiling for celebrations and events, but in newer community houses, such as the one at Skrova, the main space is built to accommodate sport activities as well. In some communities there is a strong tradition for community houses; all of the islands in Rødøy municipality have a community house, except for myken. Today some of these islands have abandoned their community house in favor of the school which is funded by the municipality.



Skrova Community House, Skrova.



Kveøy Community House, Kvæfjord Municipality.

Grocery Store

The grocery store is the daily meeting place in many island communities. Neighbours meet and catch up over a cup of coffee. It is the one place where you always have a reason to go, if only to buy some more milk. At Myken all of the mailboxes are placed on the outside of the store, so that it becomes as natural part of the day, picking up your paper and meeting your neighbours. Outdoor spaces with benches and tables offer a place to linger even though nothing special is happening. The smaller the island is, the more important the grocery store becomes. It offers *something*, which is infinitely more than nothing.



Selsøyvik General Store, Rødøyene.



Myken Grocery Store, Rødøyene.

Quay

The quay is the only space on an island community that in its essence is open. Paradoxically it is also probably the one space that is used the least amount of time. It is always accessible, but it only functions as a meeting place whenever the ferry arrives. Then it becomes the most extroverted space on an island. People who are just travelling by can stand on deck and chat with their friends on the island, and everyone who is there at the time can get an update on who is leaving and who is coming. On some occasions there are probably more people on board the boat than on the island. When the express ferry to Bodø passes my island, there might be up to 220 people on board. There are rarely more than 30 people on the island. On many islands the quay and the grocery store are quite close to each other. This is related to old social structures where the merchant owned large parts of the island, and also controlled the ship calls.



Støtt Quay, Meløyene.



Lovund Quay, Lurøyene.

Care Home

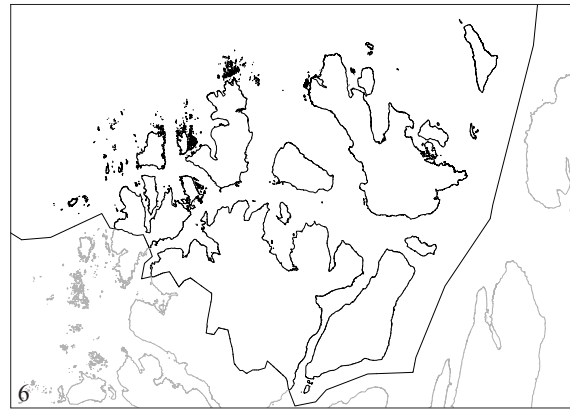
The Care Home is maybe not what most people think of as a public, or social space, but I would argue that in many communities it actually is. In many archipelagos there is only one care home. This means that people who have lived on different islands all their lives suddenly could become neighbours when they move to the care home. An island care home is also usually open at any time, so that you can just stop by to visit your loved ones without needing a key. Many island populations are aging, and care homes will be an important part of many islanders' life also in the future. There is a brutality in having to move over the ocean to a different island when you get old, but at the same time it is something nice in the togetherness one could experience at a care home.

My grandmother and I moved away from the island at the same time. Me to start high school, her to move to the care home at Rødøy. When I was home for holidays we would go visit her. I remember that the other residents would be happy to see us; some of them also came from other islands and didn't get visitors very often. One time we were there, we brought grandma up to the sheltered ward on the 2nd floor to visit a good friend of her. Her friend came from the island Myken, a fishing community 30 km away from our island. They had been friends since they were young, but hadn't seen each other that much due to the distances. Now they suddenly were neighbours and could enjoy each other's company every day. I thought this was nice. When grandma died the coffin had to be moved from Rødøy to Gjerøy, where the funeral was held in our local house of worship. The coffin was shipped with the express ferry from Bodø, and we came to meet it at Gjerøy Quay. We carried it out from the luggage storage on board, which is practically in the passenger lounge, on land where we put it in a Toyota Hiace van that we had borrowed, and got the coffin to the morgue at the grave yard. The day after the funeral was held.



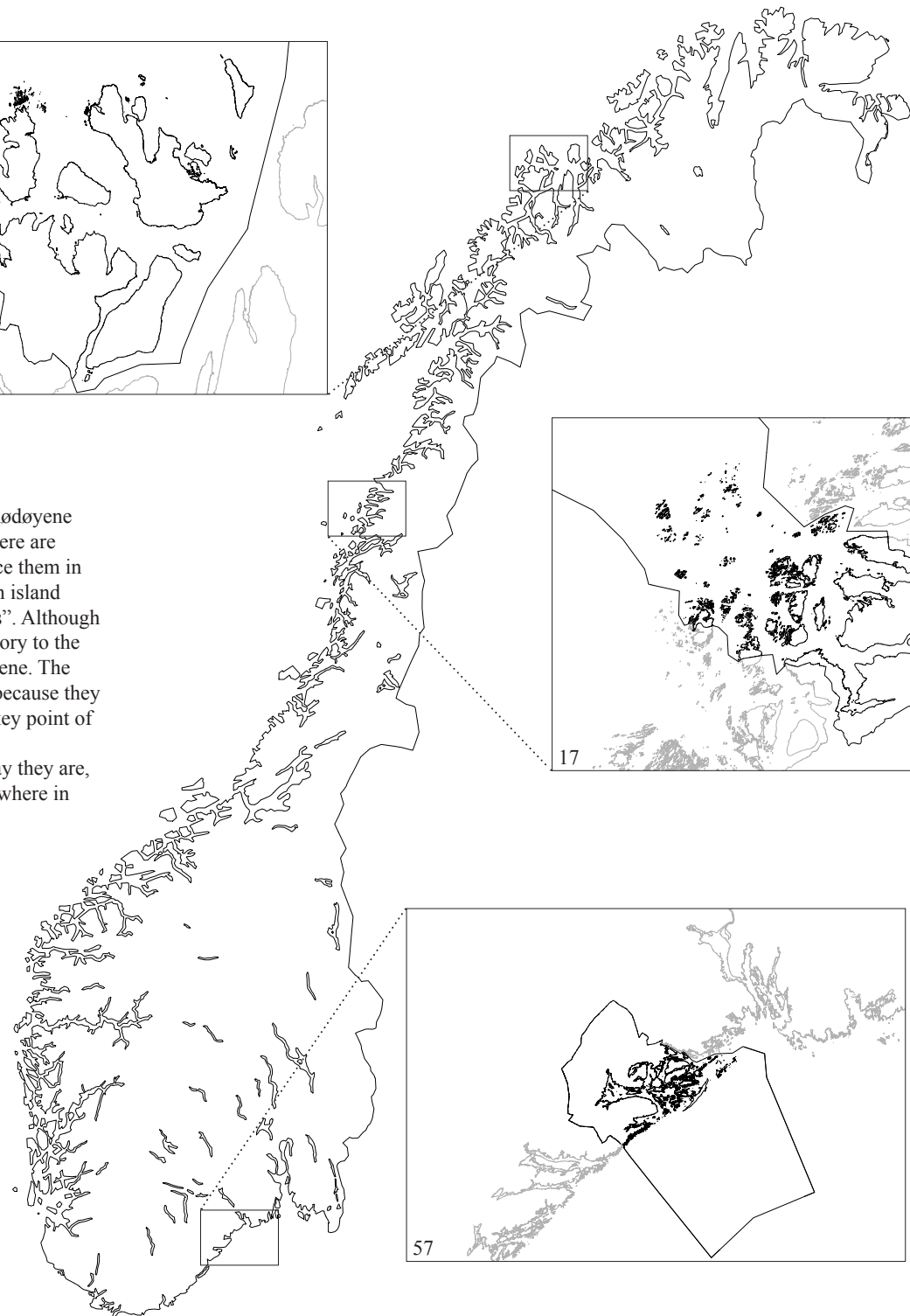
Rødøy Care Home, Rødøyene.

Analysis



My main research is an analysis of three different island communities; Karløy (6), Rødøyene (17) and Kragerøskjærgården (57). These communities have many similarities, but there are some fundamental geographical, geological, historical and social differences that place them in different categories. Karløy is defined as "big islands" in my overview of Norwegian island communities. Both Rødøyene and Kragerøskjærgården is defined as "island networks". Although these two communities share many characteristics, i am tempted to add another category to the list, namely "suburban islands", to describe Kragerøskjærgården in relation to Rødøyene. The reason I have not included any of the "single island" communities in this analysis is because they are not as relevant in this spesific context, where connections with other islands is a key point of interest.

The aim of the analysis is to make clear why these communities are structured the way they are, and maybe reveal some patterns that can inform a potential spatial intervention somewhere in these communities.



Karlsøy

Population in municipality:	2263
Population on islands:	1107
Area of municipality:	1092 km ²

Karlsøy municipality is named after the old church site at the island of Karlsøy which used to be the center of the old Karlsøy municipality that also included areas on the mainland. Helgøy was a separate municipality from 1886 to 1964 and included the western parts the contemporary Karlsøy Municipality. Karlsøy is a pure island municipality, but the island of Ringvassøya has been connected to the mainland since 1988 with an underwater tunnel. There are in addition five populated islands in the municipality; Rebbernesøy, Reinøya, Karlsøya, Vannøya and Nordkvaløya, all but Nordkvaløya connected to Ringvassøya with car ferries. The center at Hansnes has a school for pupils from Reinøya, Rebbernesøya, Ringvassøya and Karlsøya, where as Vannøya still has two schools for local pupils. The islands in Karlsøy are characterised by their size; some of them are in fact some of the largest islands in Norway. This is reflected in the relatively modest network of ferries, which mainly transport cars between the islands where roads are the main means of communication.

Rødøy

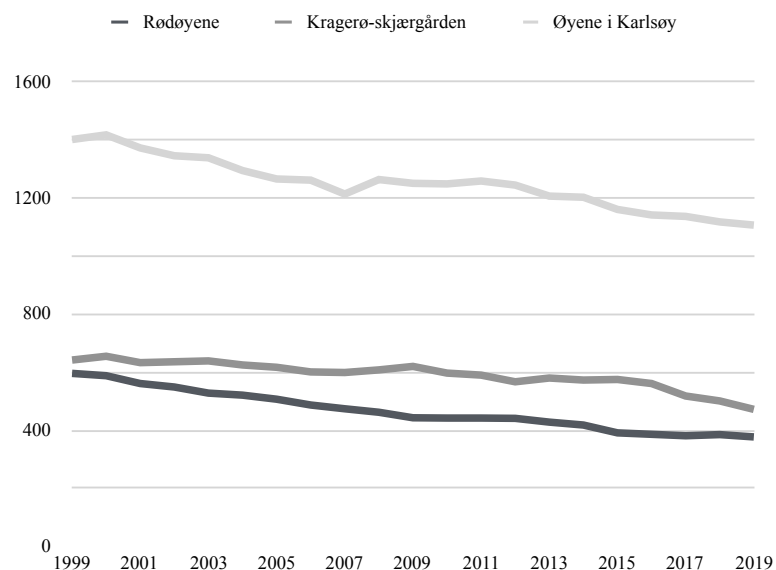
Population in municipality:	1238
Population on islands:	377
Area of municipality:	711 km ²

Rødøy municipality is named after the island of Rødøy, which has been a central church site since the middle ages, and the center of the old Rødøy parish which used to include all the neighbouring municipalities; Meløy, Træna, Lurøy and Rana. There are no densely populated areas in the municipality, but there is an administrative center at Vågaholmen on the mainland. The islands are connected to each other with a network of ferry, fast ferry, and regional routes which makes it possible to commute between the islands and the mainland. The island district of Rødøy consists of over 1000 islands, the biggest with an area of 14,5 km². Around 1950 over thirty of these were populated, but in 2019 there are only nine islands still populated with a combined population of 377. There are schools on Nesøy, Gjerøy, and Rødøy, and three schools on the mainland. Pupils from Storselsøy and Selsøyvik are transported to Rødøy.

Kragerø

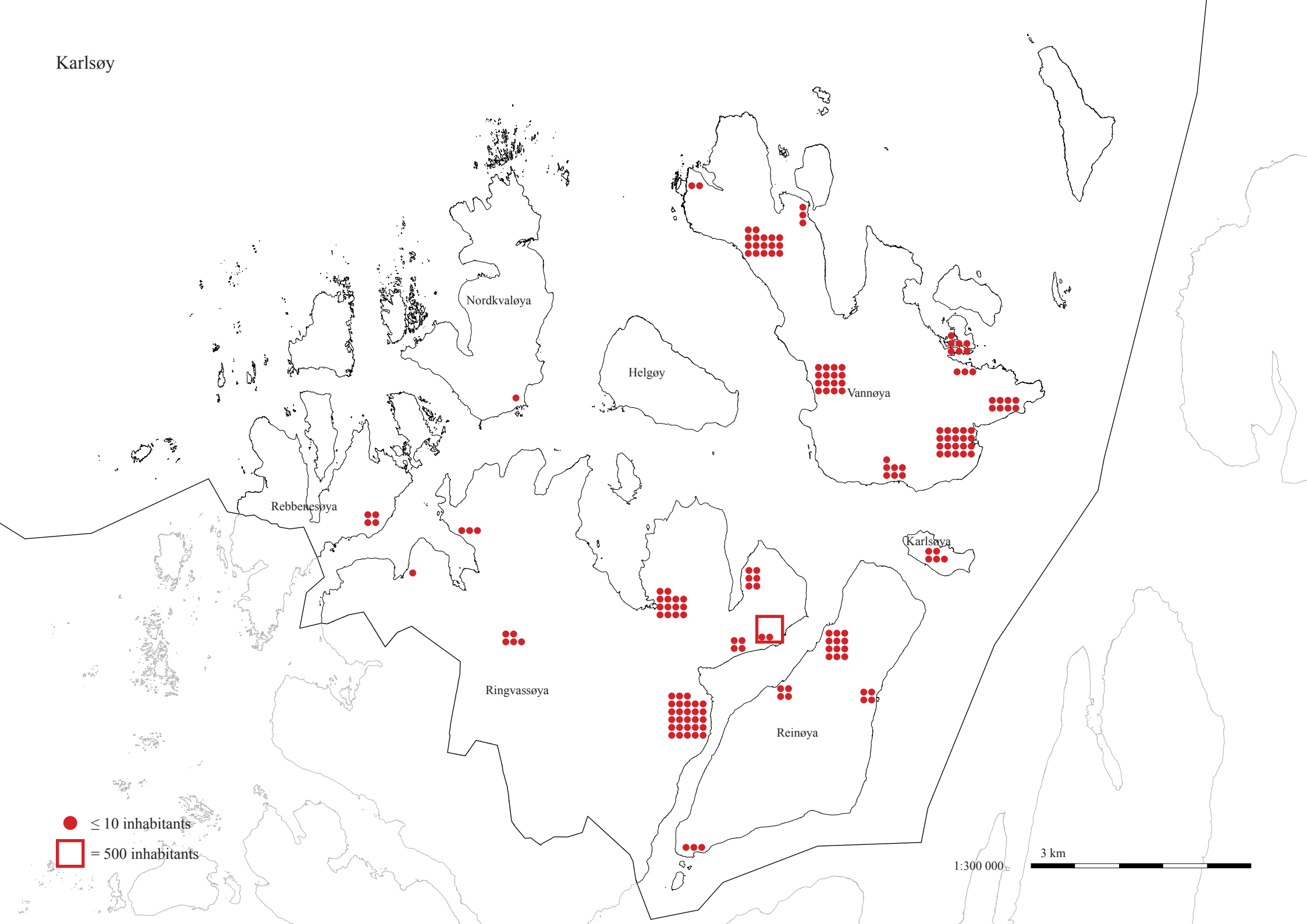
Population in municipality:	10 406
Population on islands:	472
Area of municipality:	305 km ²

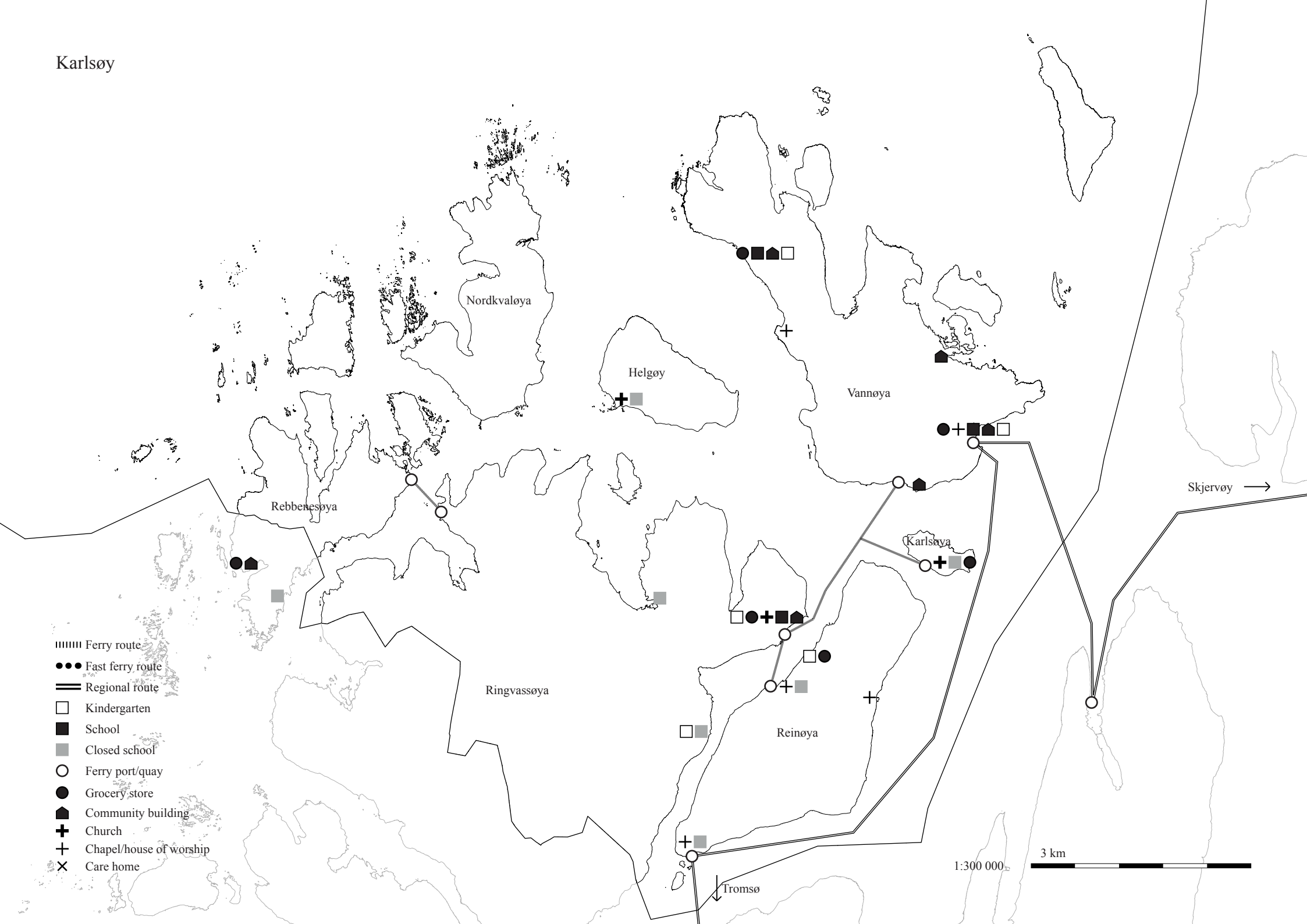
Kragerø municipality is a town municipality, the islands make up only a small part of the total area and population in the municipality. The islands with some mainland areas constituted a separate municipality up until 1960 when it was merged with the town of Kragerø. There are eight populated islands in the archipelago, only Skåtøy has a school and a church, and this used to be the center of the old municipality. The distances to the town of Kragerø is relatively short, and the ferry network is well developed. Pupils from Jomfruland commute to the school at Skåtøy, pupils from Tåtøy and other islands commute to Kragerø. There are more than 4000 holiday homes in the municipality, many of these are located on the islands. This has a great impact on these communities during the summer. Compared to both Karlsøy and Rødøy the size of the Kragerø islands and the extent of them are quite modest. They create a basin, protected from the Skagerrak Sea which makes it easier and safer to travel with smaller boats all year around than in Karlsøy and Rødøy. Cold winters can create other problems this far south, as the basin has a tendency to freeze, thus creating problems for ferries and other boats transporting people between the islands.



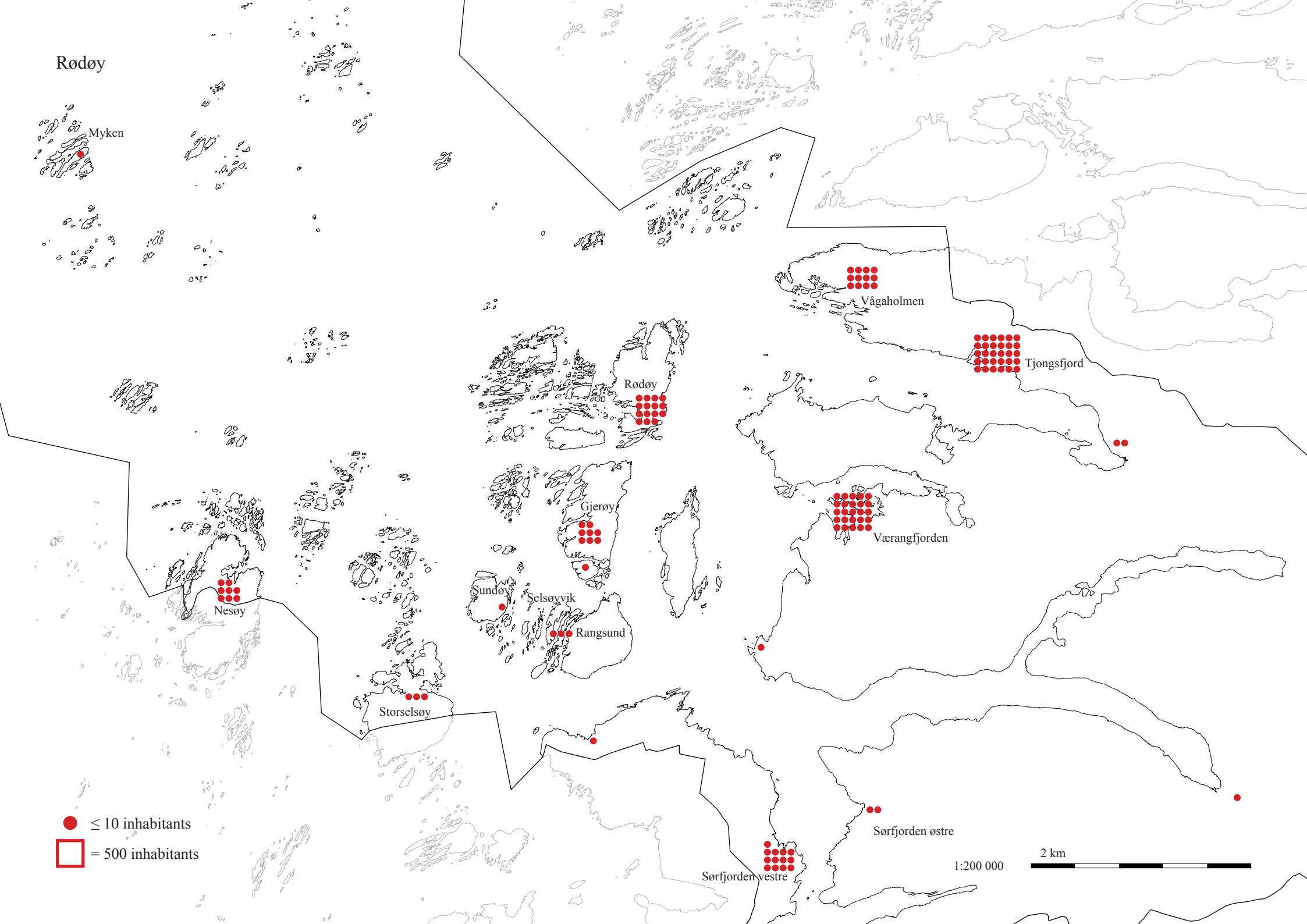
Development in the island population in Rødøy, Kragerø and Karlsøy Municipalities

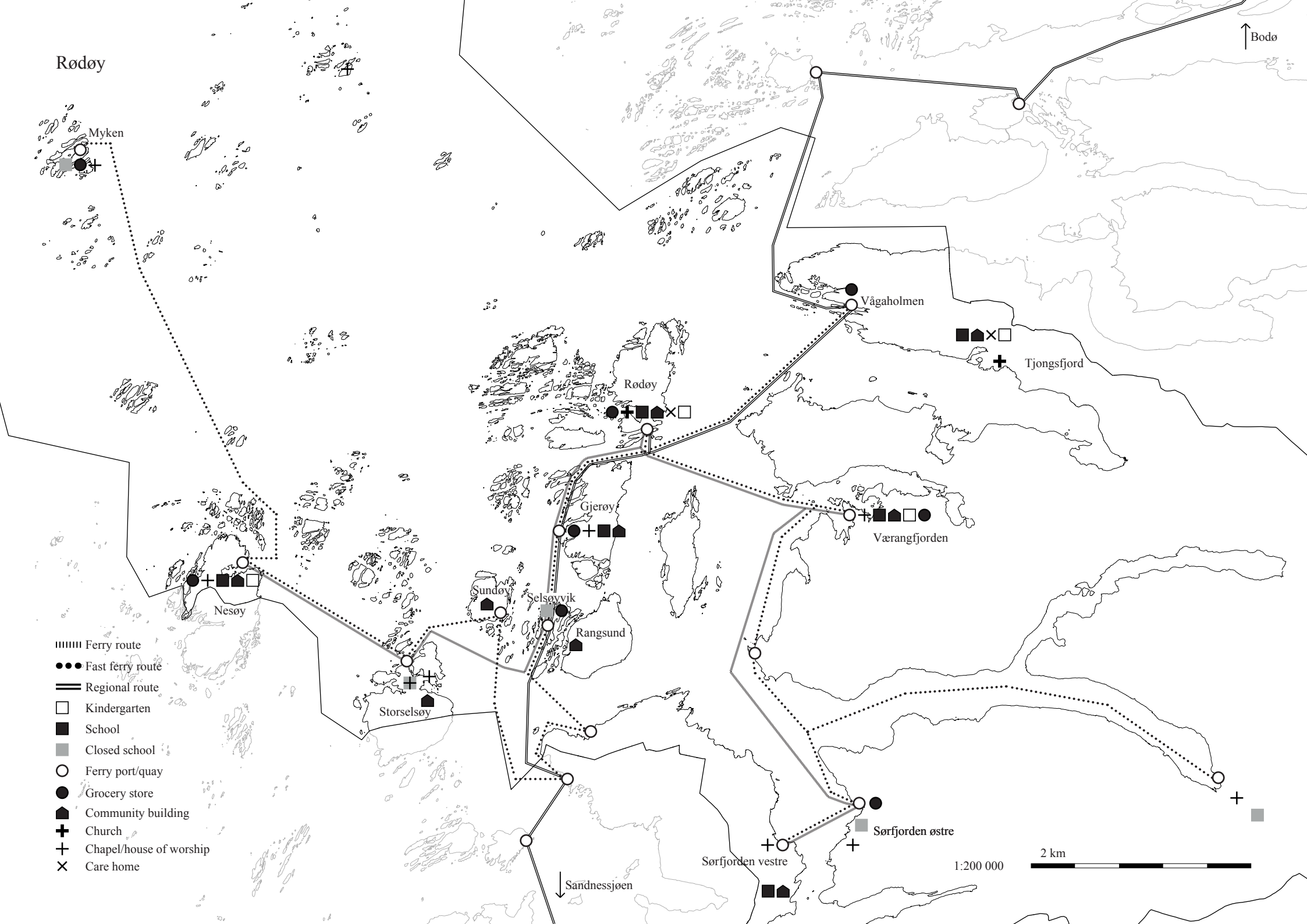
Karlsøy





- Ferry route
- Fast ferry route
- ===== Regional route
- Kindergarten
- School
- Closed school
- Ferry port/quay
- Grocery store
- Community building
- ✚ Church
- ✚ Chapel/house of worship
- ✕ Care home





Rødøy

Myken

Bodø

Vågaholmen

Tjongsfjord

Rødøy

Gjerøy

Værangfjorden

Nesøy

Sundøy

Selsøyvik

Rang Sund

Storselsøy

Sørkjorden østre

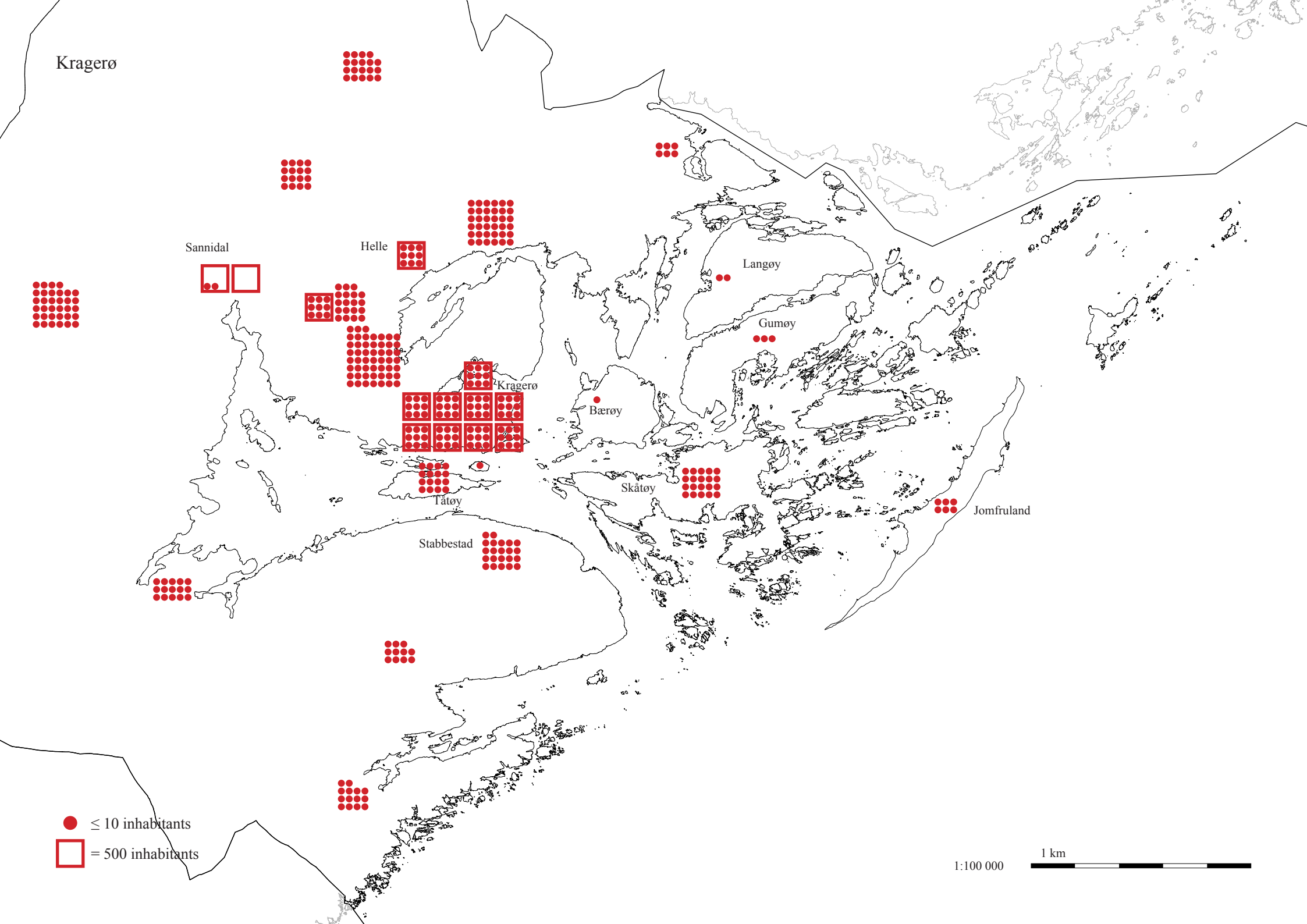
Sørkjorden vestre

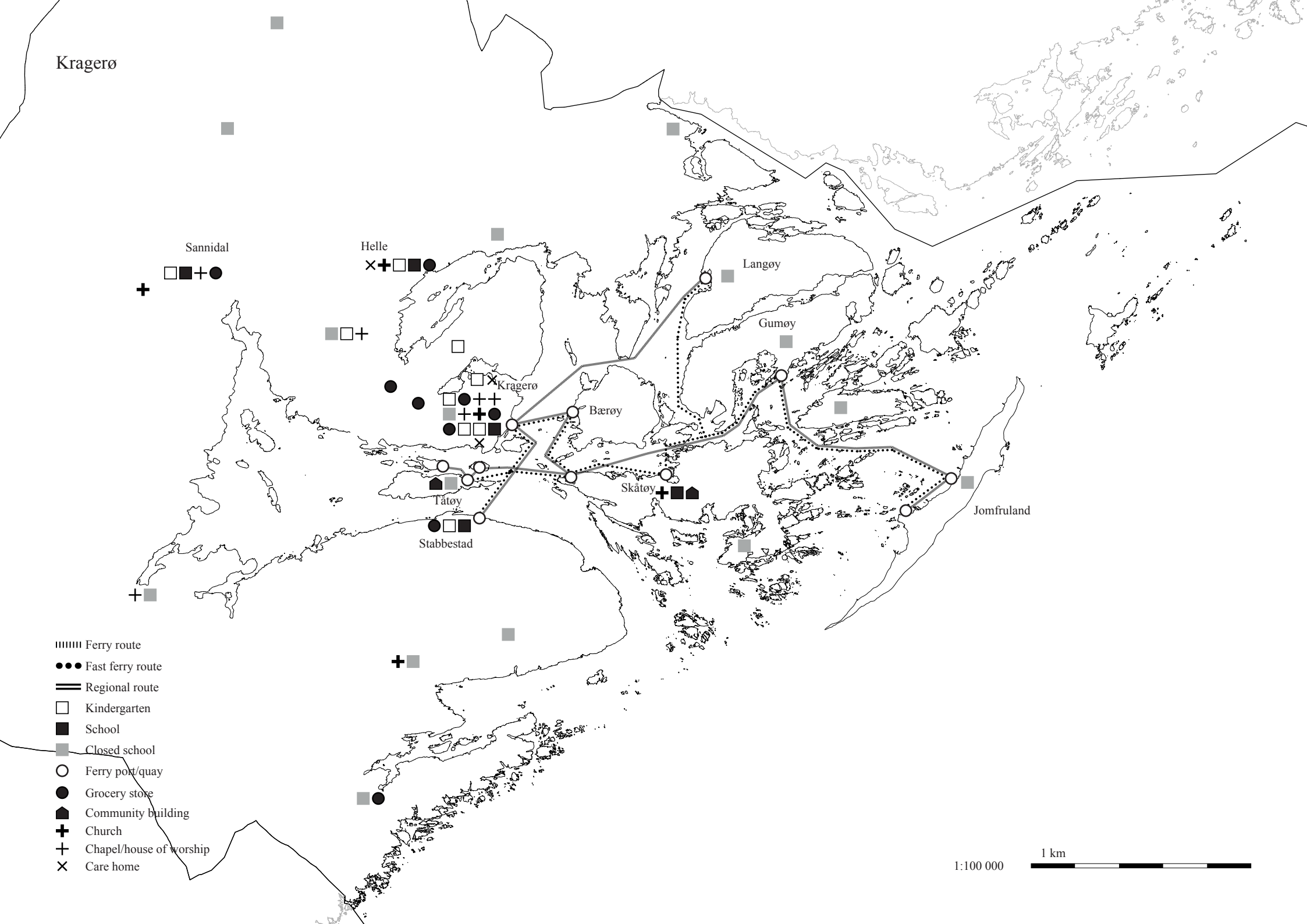
Sandnessjøen

- Ferry route
- Fast ferry route
- ==== Regional route
- Kindergarten
- School
- Closed school
- Ferry port/quay
- Grocery store
- Community building
- ✚ Church
- ✚ Chapel/house of worship
- ✕ Care home

1:200 000

2 km





Kragerø

Sannidal

Helle

Langøy

Gumøy

Bærøy

Skåtøy

Stabbestad

Jomfruland

----- Ferry route

..... Fast ferry route

===== Regional route

□ Kindergarten

■ School

■ Closed school

○ Ferry port/quay

● Grocery store

■ Community building

✚ Church

✚ Chapel/house of worship

✕ Care home

1:100 000

1 km

There are some obvious conclusions to draw out from the previous analysis. First of all distances seem to be an important parameter in the structure of public services. We have seen that in the Kragerø Archipelago there is only one school left, even though there are still 478 people living on the islands. In Rødøy there are three schools and two kindergartens left on the islands with a total population of 377. There are two major differences that could be the reason for this. Distances in Rødøy are considerable longer than in Kragerø, and the ferry routes are more exposed to open waters. Another notable difference is that the center of Kragerø Municipality is a town with more than 5000 inhabitants, while there are no real centers in Rødøy Municipality. This could have consequences for the public service structure, but more so, on the distribution on local grocery stores.

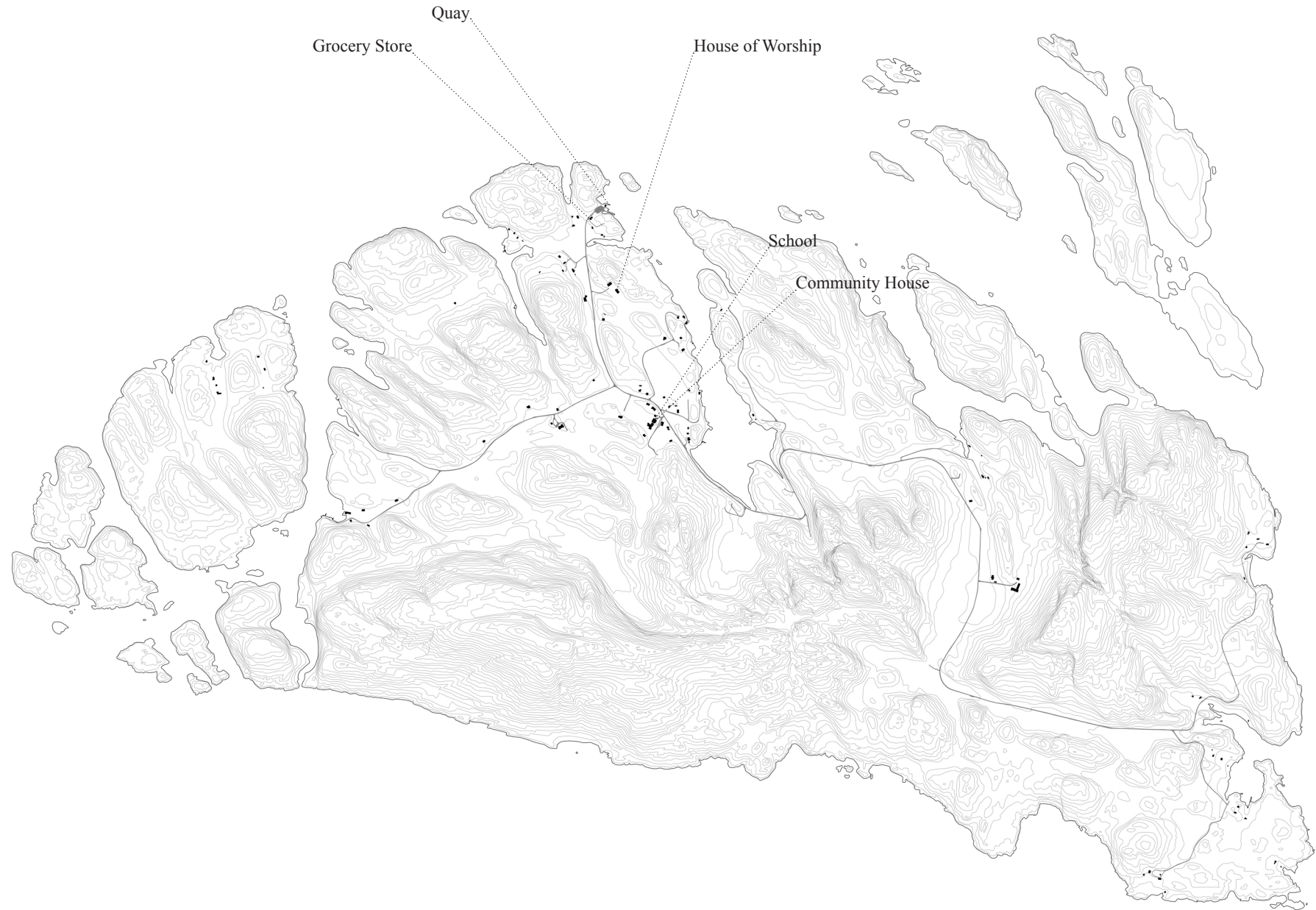
In the municipality of Karlsøy it becomes clear that not distance in itself, but distance over open waters is decisive for the structure of public services. The islands with short distances to the center at Hansnes have no schools left. Hansnes holds center functions for all the islands in the municipality except Vannøya. Even though distances are long, they are manageable as long as you can drive your car.

There are some immediate interesting findings in all the maps, that can tell us something about historical structures. On the island Helgøy in Karlsøy there is a church and a closed school, but the island is abandoned. This used to be the center of an old municipality, but it seems very remote today. In Kragerø there is a large number of closed schools on the islands, which tells us something about historical population structure in the archipelago, probably quite different than that of today. In Rødøy the ferry routes themselves are traces of ancient traffic routes that still are important on one of the most fragmented coastlines in the world.

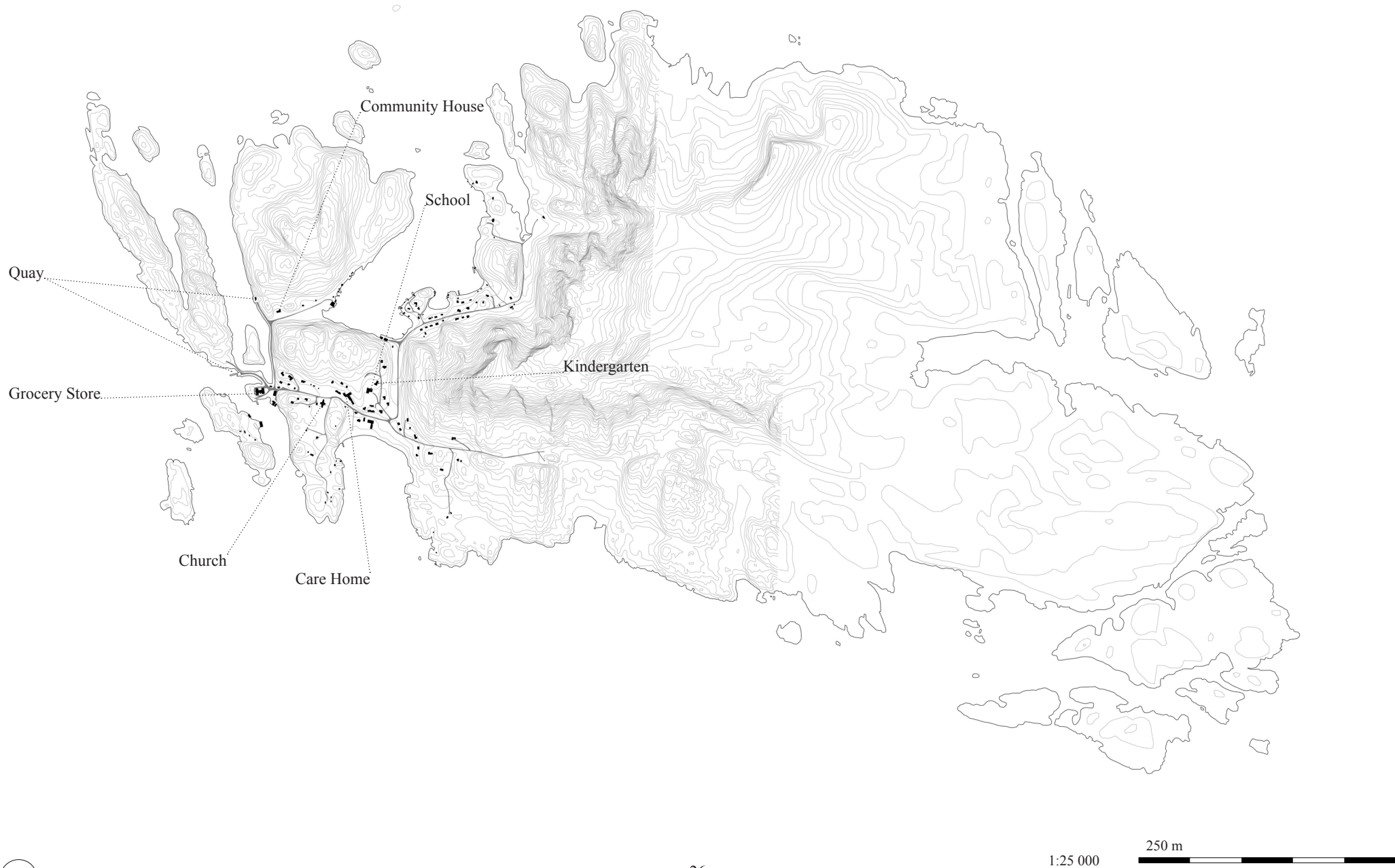
One of the aims for me in this pre-diploma report has been to find a site for my diploma project. Along the way it has become clear to me that the result of this has turned out to be a set of criteria that describes an ideal site, and an ideal island.

1. The site should be in an island network. The analysis suggests that there is a demand for public spaces and functions even in small communities.
2. The site should be in relation to a quay. Connections to other islands are important, especially since many of them have small populations and could benefit from the interactions with other islands.
3. The island should already have a set of social programs, most important a school and a grocery store.
4. There should be more than 50 inhabitants on the island.

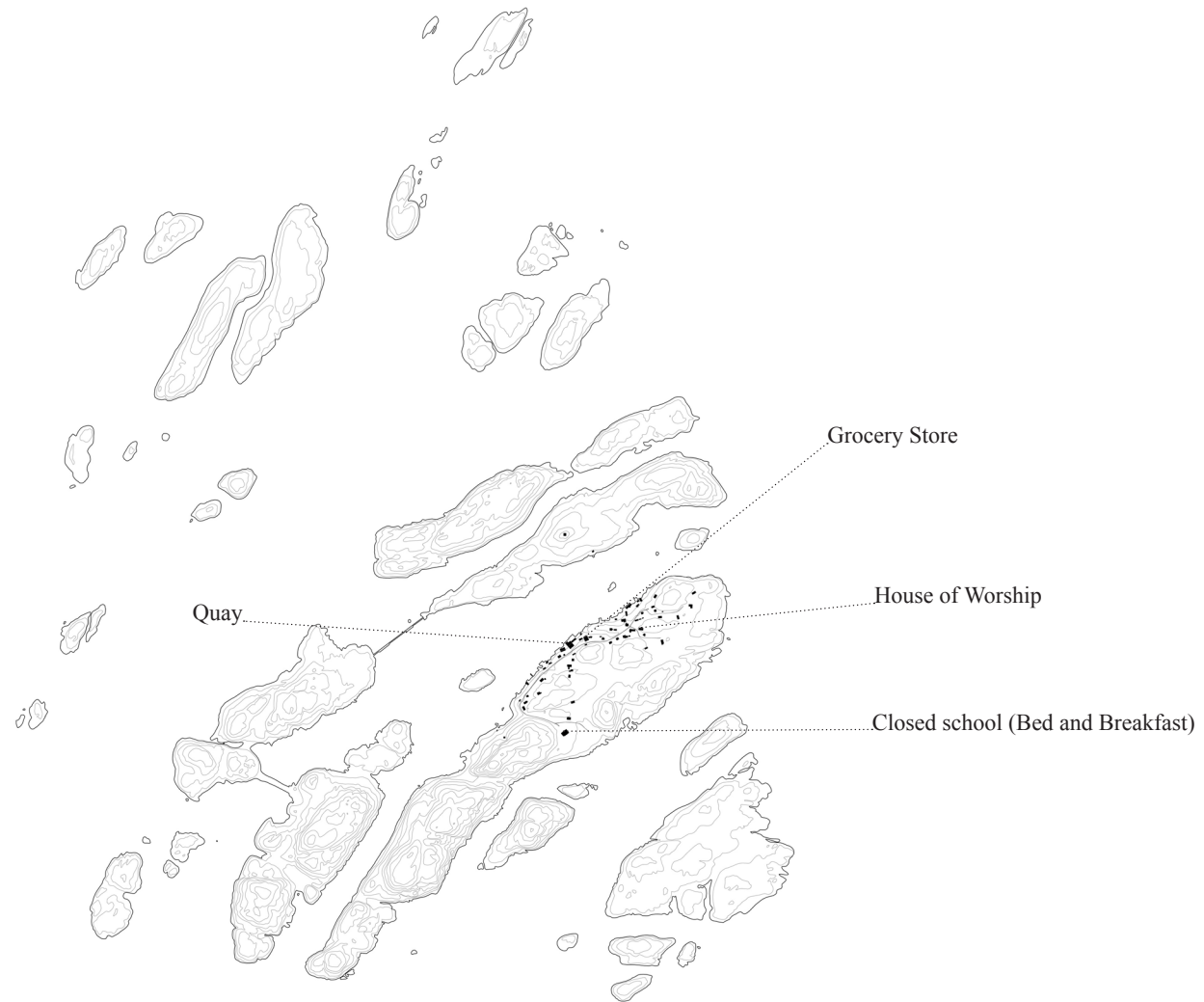
These criteria limit the search considerably, and the island community that stands out as the most relevant from my analysis is Rødøyene. In the following maps I have zoomed in on some islands in the archipelago of different sizes and characters. Only two of them fulfill the criteria for potential site, namely Gjerøy and Rødøy. There is in addition one island in the archipelago that fulfills the criteria, namely Nesøy, and it is quite similar to Gjerøy in both size and character.







Myken
12 inhabitants



Program

My research has led me to a preliminary program for my diploma, which is thought to fit a potential island defined by a set of criteria. My assesment is that even in small communities it seems to possible to maintain a grocery store, even though the population might be less than 30. The gorcery store provides an important informal meeting place in many island communities. The school is probably the most important public service on an island. When combined with a community space, the building might also have a future even with a potential closure. This leaves me with mixed use program consisting of these three functions; grocery store, school and community space.

Preliminary program:

- Storage space
- Shop space
- Office
- Restrooms
- Two small classrooms
- One big classroom/community space
- School kitchen/community kitchen
- A teachers office
- Two locker rooms
- Library/group room
- Entrance hall

References

Træna Badstue-Naust

Husøy, Træna
Maja and Hilda Hallén, 2016

Naust is the Norwegian word for boat house. In 2016 the two architects Maja and Hilda Hallén initiated the project of rebuilding the oldest naust in Træna into a meeting place. The main space is a mini amfi with a big window facing the ocean, where people can sit and cool down while using the sauna. The project was completed as a part the Artist in Residence program which is run annually by Træna Municipality.

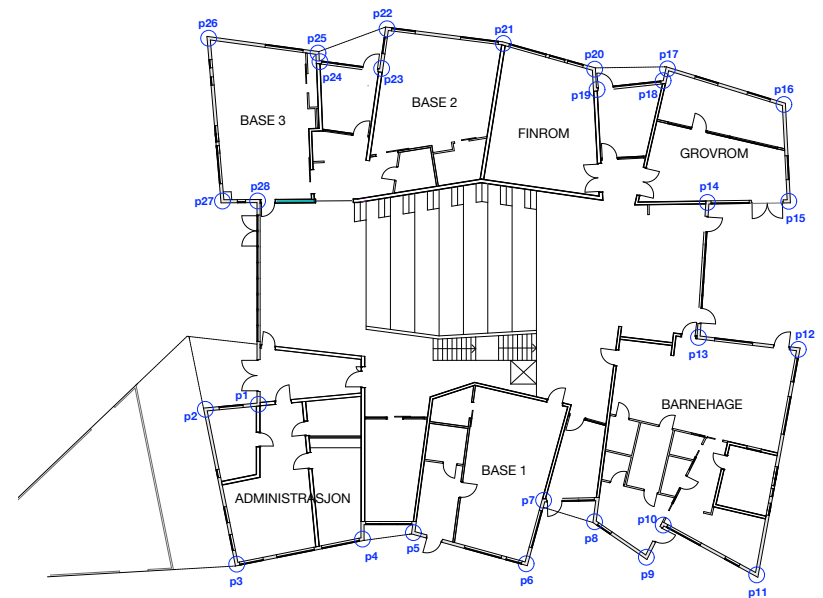




Sirakompasset

Utsira
Trodahl Arkitektur/Studio Ludo, 2010

Community building with school, kindergarten and culture center combined. The building is situated on Utsira Island which is the smallest municipality in Norway with only 218 inhabitants. The culture center consists of an amphitheater and a stage and is closed for the public during the schools' and the kindergarten's opening hours.



Refugium

Fleinvær, Ytre Gildeskål

Rintala Eggertson Architects/Tyin Tegnestue, 2015-2016

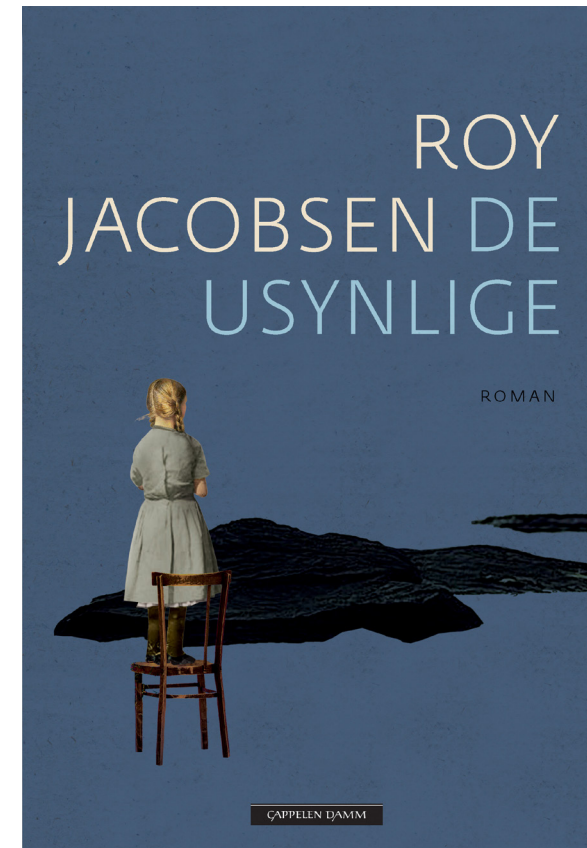
The "Refugium" on the small island of Fleinvær is a cluster of buildings serving as hideouts for tourists and an artist residency. The cluster was built in a series of building workshops taking place in 2015 and 2016. The aim was to establish a balance between the buildings and the landscape by breaking each volume down to a scale which suited the barren topography. While being functional and ergonomic, the buildings can be seen as nature observatories with framed views towards the landscape.



The Unseen

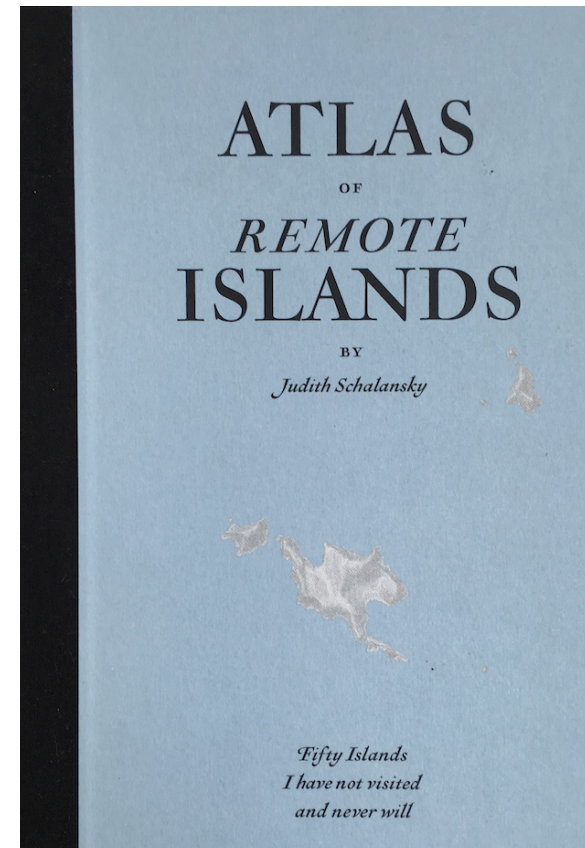
Novel by Roy Jacobsen, 2014

The Unseen is about a girl who grows up on a small island on the Helgeland Coast at the beginning of the 20th century. It is a historical novel that tells an important history of a distinctive culture, but it also has a set of general considerations about living on an island, regardless of time, that I think are important and inspirational when dealing with the topic.



Atlas of Remote Islands

Judith Schalansky, 2012



Footnotes

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¹ Store Norske Leksikon, s. v. “Norge”. Last modified 25.3.2019. <https://snl.no/Norge>

² Store Norske Leksikon, s. v. “Norges historie”. Last modified 20.2.2019.
https://snl.no/Norges_historie

³ Wikipedia, s. v. “Public space”. Last modified 12.02.2019.
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⁴ Lillegaard, *Kirken vår ved havet*, 7.

⁵ Statistisk sentralbyrå, “Grunnkretsenes befolkning 1999-2019”. 2.5.2019.
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