1. The aim of compiling a biographical chronology of Mihály Babits’s life and work

The data for making this biographical chronology were provided by the large number of Babits’s manuscripts, the nearly 10,000 letters – of which 1,250 were written by Babits and more than 8,000 were addressed to him – Sophie Török’s notebooks kept after their marriage in 1921, the documents of the Baumgarten Foundation, the moving pages of the so-called ‘conversation-books’ from the years when Babits was unable to speak, and so on.

Four collections of manuscripts: the so called Angel Book (Angyalos könyv), two collections of poems sent to Dezső Kosztolányi in 1906, the first three volumes of Babits’s poems (Levelek Iris koszorújából – 1909, Herceg, hátha megjön a tél is! – 1911, Recitativ – 1913) dedicated to his friend the philosopher Vilmos Szilasi, and Babits’s memoirs communicated orally to the young poet Lőrinc Szabó are decisive sources for the first volume of the chronology. Like most of his contemporaries, poets, novelists etc. and many of his predecessors, Babits was keen on recording his ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experiences in space and time, and which had a determining influence on his way of thinking, on his private and public life as well as on his poems. Especially as a young, unknown poet he felt an urgent need to record them in his manuscripts at the time when he was writing his poems. Angyalos könyv is a true example of this attempt, full of his revisions, notes and dates.
Similarly in 1906 he sent most of his poems to Dezső Kosztolányi with exact dates and footnotes (explaining to him what feelings, events etc. made him write them).

In 1916 – perhaps as a sign of their close friendship – he dictated or made notes himself in three of his volumes about when and where his poems were written, and the events that inspired them.

In the autumn of 1920 Babits found his ‘Eckermann’, the young poet Lőrinc Szabó, and on several evenings, mainly over dinner, he recalled remarkable moments from his childhood, spoke about his family and above all about his poems. Lőrinc Szabó took down this ‘oral history’ in a special shorthand and it was only after Babits’s death in 1944 (at the beginning of World War II) that he dictated his master’s words to his wife, who typed them.

This biographical chronology of Mihály Babits’s life and work attempts in an unusual literary genre, a ‘microhistory’, to explore the abundant complexity of a creative personality. The chronology was begun with the critical edition of Babits’s works at the Institute for Literary Studies and served as additional material, a background study to the critical work. Its genre provided an opportunity to collect data from every field of the critical work (bibliography, letters, works etc.). On the basis of original sources and the results of contemporary literary studies as well as the most recent ones, the chronology follows day by day the events in Babits’s life, his public appearances and the significant moments of his literary career as a poet and novelist, as an editor of the literary journal Nyugat, as a literary leader, as the curator of the Baumgarten Foundation, and in doing so reveals the background to his poems, his essays and his novels. These ‘snapshots’ create a train of events in which the motives for his behaviour and his thinking processes are made perceptible.

2. Literary history, theory vs biographical chronology

The nature and objectives of literary studies in general are hotly debated, and works based on the biographical aspect are in some respects considered a waste of time. If literary theory accepts that there is no limit to the different understandings and approaches to literary works, then it should accept the idea that the biography of authors and the process of their creating their works are an important contribution to the question.
3. Biographical chronology as a special literary narrative

Literary chronology like historical chronologies is a practical genre and can be considered a special historical, literary and biographical narrative. Its author’s creative work is based on consciously compiled and reflected ‘loan texts’ and ‘loan thoughts/ideas’.

Biography vs biographical chronology

Biographies usually focus on the main biographical events and works of an author, determine different periods in their literary career and emphasize certain works and events, omitting others. Biographers present their authors according to a certain concept or preconception and try to give a clear, ‘finished’ picture about them. A biographical chronology has a different approach, it has no preconception, it tries to record every possible data available concerning its author without any selection.

Naturally the results of literary studies on the theme are also recorded, which in a way are of insufficient consequence, as those periods, events and works which literary studies have dealt with on a large scale appear much more developed in detail than the periods that have not been in the focus of scholarly work (the author of a biographical chronology has little time for intensive academic study, only for correcting, if possible, false data).

Historical vs biographical chronology

Literary historians or philologists, like historians, give the train of events a narration, creating a coherent narrative. However, differing from the historical point of view, coherence here is based not on a hierarchy of importance, but on giving each fact and event under an exact date. The obvious and natural beginning and end to interpretation is provided by a lifetime.

Micro-history

The parallel trends of historical and chronological writing may be narrowed down to the much closer relationship to the aspects and methods or theoretical and practical horizons of micro-history. Micro-history does not deal with the ‘big world’ traditionally examined (with its political, social and economic processes), it is interested in the privacy of historical existence, in ‘micro-worlds’, in micro-communities. In the interests of a more intensive study it narrows down the scale of historical analysis. This ‘change of scale’, which focuses on one enlarged figure of a group-photograph should keep to the golden mean in order not to endanger the authenticity of the narration.
4. The question of time and space, changes of horizon in the narrative

"When we relate past events we do not bring back past memories but words about our images. [...] Our remembrance is present about the past.” (Saint Augustine)

Aspect of time

The time-sphere of the biographical chronology includes the Common and Progressive aspects. The Common sense reflects to the flow of life-time (the totality of micro-history, the ‘life-film’), the Progressive is a series of ‘freeze frames’ from this ‘life-film’ that focuses on each single day. (To bring the narrative alive it uses the Historic Present Tense.)

5. Practice and problems in Babits’s biographical chronology

The author of this chronology is bound hand and foot when re-creating her ‘hero’, ‘her Mihály Babits’. She has made every effort to maintain objectivity (although she accepts Gadamer’s statement according to which objectivity is almost an illusion). Chronology as a special literary/historical narrative carries with it all the problems, controversies and contradictions of philology, micro- and macro-history, and the time-aspect. Furthermore, it is at the mercy of its sources, which originate from various times and genres. As a consequence, the narrative shows some heterogeneousness.

Biographical chronologies of foreign and Hungarian authors and the chronology of Mihály Babits

Although the genre of biographical chronology has been appreciated and used in both western and eastern European literary history for a long time, it rarely occurs in the Hungarian study of literature.

Popular chronologies, scholarly chronologies, multi-volume and single volume chronologies have been published abroad, such as biographical chronologies of Thomas Mann, Lev Tolstoi, Heinrich Heine, J. W. Goethe, V. V. Maiakovski and Charles Baudelaire.

There are chronologies of Hungarian poets, writers or other outstanding personalities, most of which only consist of published data and which select their own important biographical events (Petőfi napjai a magyar irodalomban 1842–1849 [Petőfi’s days in Hungarian literature] by Sándor Endrődy – 1911; Madách Imre életrajzi krónika [Chronicle of the life of Imre Madách] by György Radó).
Babits life-chronology

As there cannot exist two novels exactly the same, so there cannot be two similar biographical chronologies, since the personality and works of the author and the vision of those who write chronologies determine what type of work is to be done. There is no special code for chronologies either, because it is impossible to construct a code valid for always and for everyone. In spite of this the selection of facts and data in a chronology should not be arbitrary: everything available from different sources and which can be dated must be recorded. And this relative ‘totality’ will always adjust to the ‘hero’, Mihály Babits; each fact, each event must relate directly or indirectly to him.

The Babits micro-history flashes before us the historical and cultural events of his time, but focuses on the biographical events of a man and a poet and tries to open new paths for research. Information is realized on two levels, the real level and on a deduced level. Real facts are based on exact data, which are generally valid but may exhibit contradictions which sometimes cannot be resolved, just noted. Deduced facts or dates are naturally provisional or temporary and only function as indications. Events marked with a definite date are open to different interpretations or explanations, therefore if there exist several sometimes controversial sources on the ‘critical’ points, literal quotations are given, on which the author of the chronology has had to make (critical) comments.

The first volume of the Babits life-chronology

Since 1990 literary scholarship has been trying to catch up with the arrears which were the consequence of a narrow-minded cultural policy that ignored Babits’s overall oeuvre. Several books and volumes of critical editions of his novels, dramas, correspondence etc. have been published. The author of this Babits chronology must deal with this problem alone, and keep pace with the flood of publications.

The description of Babits’s early years in the first volume (1883–1908) gives a good picture of his hometown, Szekszárd, his family and his life at school in Pécs, which determined the child’s personality. The correspondence between the members of his large family, the documents of his school years and Babits’s university studies, give us a kind of history of culture and an insight into everyday life at the turn of the century. This ‘micro-world’ broadens with time, supported by facts which show the university student in Budapest, discussing his ideas and literary experience with his friends, Gyula Juhász and Dezső Kosztolányi, then the first years of the young teacher in
Baja, Szeged and Fogaras, along with a shy, yet conscious preparation for a poetic career.

1908 is a turning-point and a landmark in Babits’s life. The young teacher like Ovid is sent to ‘Tomi’, to the snow-capped mountains of Fogaras in Rumania but the shy poet, who deliberately tried to avoid publicity, thanks to his ambitious friends Juhász and Kosztolányi, becomes widely known. On September 1 1908 A Holnap, an anthology of seven young poets, is published, and the famous literary journal Nyugat first publishes five poems of his on November 16.

1908 is the year when Babits’s poetic career begins, which gives a fine ending to the first volume of his chronology and a good start to the following volumes.

**Technical remarks**

Exact dates (year, month, day and hour if known) originate from documents, publications, and literary studies, but the author of the chronology has occasionally been forced to pursue her own studies in order to revise them. The text itself and the bibliographical footnotes show how the dates given have been arrived at.

The chronological entries consist of two typographically different parts:

1. The description of a biographical event: quotation marks are only used in literal quotations, otherwise the narrative summarizes the statements of several works in a ‘free’ way.

2. Lásd (see) lists all the references and sources that refer to the above mentioned biographical event (manuscripts are followed by monographs, volumes of essays, articles in journals and daily papers in chronological order; lásd még (see also) gives additional information and cross-references, vő. (compare/cf.) draws attention to sources that give contradictory information, dates, or simply errors.

The list of sources provides a full bibliographical description and at the end of the chronology there is an index of names, places and Babits’s works.
Final remarks
The ‘picture’ of Babits constantly changes in the light of new studies and the chronology tries to present and follow these changes. This openness distinguishes a chronology that recalls an ended life-time in a more open manner than a biographical novel.

The author’s main aim in writing a Babits chronology was to find a special approach to understand and interpret his life and work. Still, when the chronology registers the background to Babits’s works and events in his life, it does not presume a ‘direct’ contact between his life and his work: *when a real life event becomes part of a literary work, it ceases to be relevant as a biographical event and vice versa.* "Everything that a writer says in his novel is picked out from reality by an invisible frame: once he has given form to things, they have no relation to reality, as a picture has nothing in common with the wall even though the wall gives it support and a position. Inside the frame a different space deepens and a particular time flows.” (Mihály Babits)

Hopefully this Babits chronology will be more than just a reference book. It also provides an exciting reading experience for those who are interested in one of the outstanding authors of the 20th century, and through his life and work can give an insight into the intellectual life of his time.