To what purpose did Jesuits missionaries in Paraguay practiced astronomy? In China, Jesuit astronomy was a hyperbolic operation of captatio benevolentiae. Faced with a sophisticated civilization that valued highly knowledge of the heavenly realm, the missionaries sent to China aspired to impress the imperial dignitaries with their command of apparatuses and predictive accuracy in the hope of gaining their intellectual respect and thus being allowed to preach their message. Nothing of the sort occurred in Paraguay or Río de la Plata. The indigenous peoples of South America had the astronomical lore of hunter-gatherer societies. They learned to recognize celestial objects that could help them find their way in the Chaco jungle or the Patagonian steppe; they used the heliacal rising of stars to mark the beginning of the year, and organized the heavenly sphere into constellations associated with their myths of origin. As to the Jesuits themselves, shortly after their arrival in South America they began to collect observations of eclipses and comets. Romano has already pointed out that Jesuit science played a different role in the Chinese missions and in those set in other lands. In China, scientific knowledge and skills were used to seduce political power; in other cases they just served the goals of the missions in an instrumental or narrowly technical sense.

This chapter is focused on Buenaventura Suárez, a Jesuit astronomer born in the Río de la Plata who worked in the Guaraní missions during the first half of the eighteenth century. In order to have a term of comparison, we will start by considering the astronomical work of Mascardi, an Italian missionary to southern Chile and northern Patagonia during the middle of the seventeenth century.

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3 The episode described in the first section of this chapter has also been studied by Prieto; see idem, Missionary scientists, 116–140.
The Stars Lead to Kircher

A small contingent of Jesuits arrived in Chile from Peru in 1593. By the middle of the seventeenth century they had established colleges, missions, and houses in several cities, along with a seminary in Santiago. It was in Chile and Patagonia where Nicolò Mascardi (1624–1674) would distinguish himself as a missionary. He was the scion of a noble family from Liguria, who ran from his house at 14 to join the Society of Jesus. The person who kindled the imagination of the young Nicolò with visions of souls to be saved in lands at the southern edge of the world was Alonso de Ovalle, the author of the *Historical Narrative of the Kingdom of Chile*. At the time when Mascardi met Ovalle in Rome, he had finished his studies of philosophy in the Collegium Romanum, where he had attended the lessons of Athanasius Kircher, the revered token of Jesuit omniscience. Sailing to South America by way of Panama, where he stayed for two years, Mascardi arrived in 1652 in the mission of Buena Esperanza, near the city of Concepción (Chile). The 1655 fierce revolt of the Araucanos wiped out this Jesuit establishment—the Italian missionary saved his life by chance, but all his astronomical instruments and books were lost. In the event Mascardi was assigned to Chiloé, the largest island in the archipelago off the coast of Chile. While there, natives from the eastern side of the Andes told him stories about the hidden City of the Caesars. Mascardi crossed that mountain range and by 1670 he had founded a mission among the Poyas, in the northern shore of the lake Nahuel Huapi (northern Argentinian Patagonia). It was from there that he departed in search of the mythical city, in four expeditions carried out between 1669 and 1773. In the course of these excursions Mascardi explored a sizable part of the Patagonian plateau—in his third attempt he reached the Strait of Magellan by land. Father Mascardi was killed by a party of hostile natives on 3 February 1674.

Like many of his religious companions, Niccolò Mascardi felt proud of having been a student of Kircher’s. His teacher was an avid collector of words and things. From the four corners of the world Kircher gathered the observational...