Revision of the flexible crinoid genus *Ammonicrinus* and a new hypothesis on its life mode

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The lecanocrinid *Ammonicrinus* (Flexibilia) is newly interpreted based on new material from the Middle Devonian of the Rhenish Massif (Eifel and Bergisches Land, Germany). The species have echinoid-like tubercles on the attachment and on the column, which bear articulated spines. The intraspecific variability of the column is discussed for three facies-controlled morphotypes, herein classified as standard “exposed−” or “encased roller−type” and the rare “settler−type”. New specimens have floating transitions between different plate sculpturing and between those individuals with none or one to several columnals with herein termed “lateral columnal enclosure extensions” on the proximal−most, barrel−like dististele and the following mesistele, which is solely distinguished by these extensions. Based on this interpretation, *Ammonicrinus kongieli* is evaluated as a subjective junior synonym of *Ammonicrinus sulcatus*. The latter species was first recognised from the Eifel (Germany). “*Ammonicrinus wachtbergenensis*”, from the upper Eifelian of the Eifel, is declared a subjective junior synonym of *Ammonicrinus doliiformis*. The first nearly complete specimen of *Ammonicrinus kerdreoletensis* is described from the lower Eifelian of Vireux−Molhain (southern Ardennes, France). Two new species are described: *Ammonicrinus jankei* sp. nov. and *Ammonicrinus leunisseni* sp. nov. A functional morphologic trend in perfecting the crown encasement by continuous modification of the lateral columnal enclosure extensions of the mesistele from the Eifelian to the Givetian, indicates a vagile benthic “predator”−driven evolution of ammonicrinids in the Eifel area. Several ammonicrinid species are herein defined as spined soft−bottom dwellers, feeding in low−intensity current water, possibly through a self−produced water flow. The first known postmortem encrusting epizoans on ammonicrinid endoskeletons are reported.

**Key words:** Crinoidea, Flexibilia, *Ammonicrinus*, Devonian, Eifel, Rhenish Massif, Germany.

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